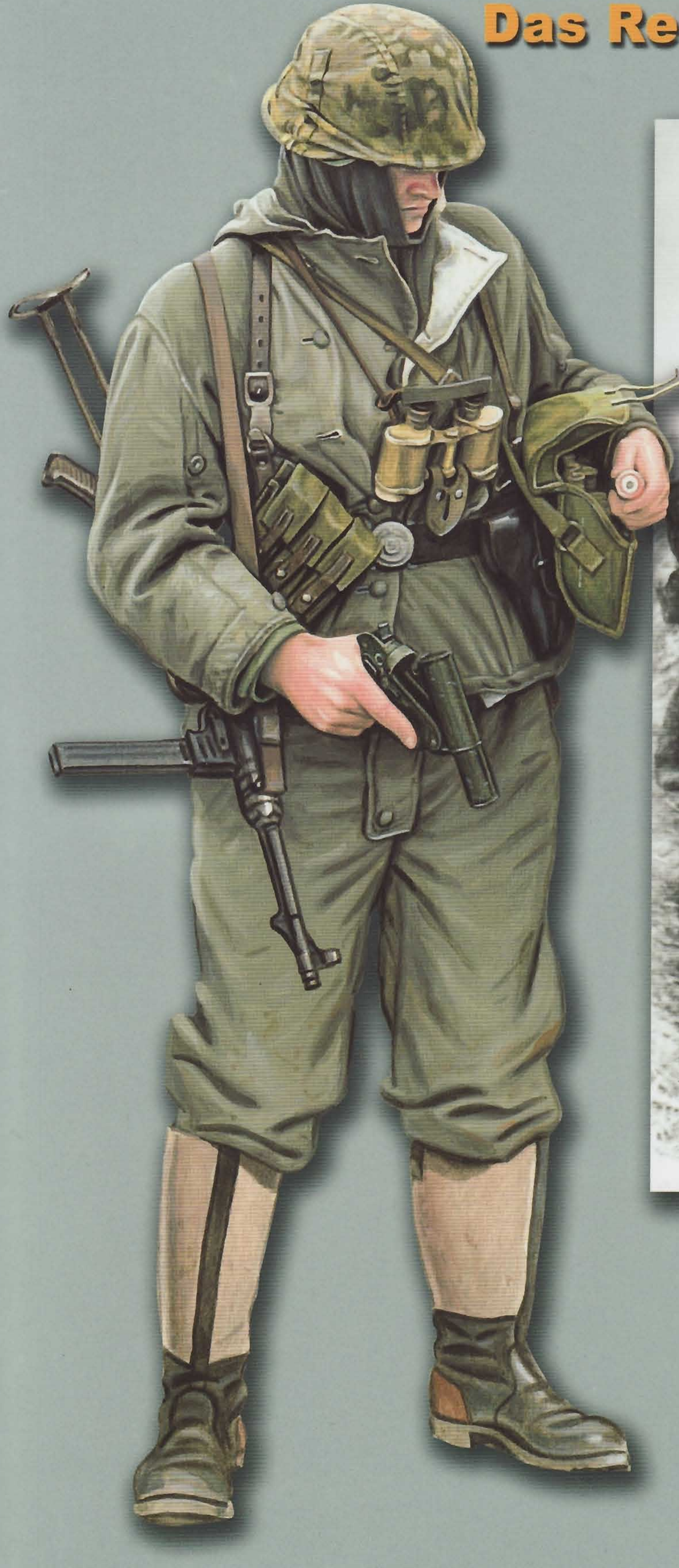
6534

Into the Cauldron

Das Reich on the Eastern Front

Robert Michulec & Dmitriy Zgonnik



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Text by Robert Michulec
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INTRODUCTION

After a long preparation, the "Das Reich" Division moved to the German–Soviet border, and when German forces finally attacked the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the division moved across the frontier to begin operations. "Das Reich" was incorporated into 46.Panzer-Korps along with 10.Panzer-Division and the famous "Großdeutschland" Division. Almost immediately it pushed through the central sector of the Eastern Front in support of Heeresgruppe Mitte. It was directed into the Bialystok area, where the Germans almost straightaway encircled large groups of bewildered Red Army forces.

Within a month the division reached the area around Yelnia, where leading spearheads of Heeresgruppe Mitte had slowed. "Das Reich", along with other Korps units then fought a series of heavy battles around Yelnia where it struggled to stem strong and determined Soviet forces. In spite of serious ammunition shortages and hot daytime temperatures, the SS units were successful and forced badly mauled Russian troops to finally abandon Yelnia. However, it was not without serious loss in SS men and equipment, although Soviet losses were much higher. It was estimated some 20,000 men had been killed and captured, with 250 armored fighting vehicles and 100 guns destroyed or captured, as well as about 30 aircraft shot down.

Following the battle at Yelnia, General Guderian pulled out "Das Reich" from the area and replaced it with Wehrmacht units that would subsequently go on to suffer just as heavy casualties as their formidable counterparts did. The fighting around Yelnia had shocked even some of the most hardened SS soldiers, and the extent of death and destruction that littered the countryside was an ominous indication of the hard fighting they had ahead of them if they were going to win the war in the East.

After "Das Reich" had been removed from the area around Yelnia, it spent a few weeks in the rear recuperating. By the time it saw action again in September, Heeresgruppe Mitte had pushed deep into Soviet territory north of the Pripet Marshes, while Heeresgruppe Süd had driven into the Ukraine. Between these two regions, at least five Soviet armies occupied an area that had become a large salient extending some 93 miles. The western tip of this salient was an area surrounding the city of Kiev. For Hitler and his generals, the area around Kiev was the perfect opportunity to trap 50 or more enemy divisions and smash them to pieces. To accomplish this grand strategy, 2.Armee and 2.Panzergruppen were to sweep in from the north and take blocking positions east of the city. From the south, 17.Armee and 1.Panzergruppen were to perform a similar maneuver and link up with the other two German formations, thus preventing the Soviets from escaping to the east. Attached to 2.Panzergruppen was the "Das Reich" Division, which served on the right wing of 24.Korps while it moved southwest and pushed through the enemy lines.

With nothing but a string of victories behind them by the end of September 1941, Heeresgruppe Mitte was regrouped for the final assault on Moscow, known as Operation Typhoon. At first the drive to Moscow for "Das Reich" went well, but by early October the weather began to change as cold driving rain fell on the troops. Within hours the Russian countryside had been turned into a quagmire, with roads and fields becoming virtually impassable. All roads leading to Moscow had become a boggy swamp. The weather conditions were so bad that even the Panzer units could not support the SS foot soldiers. To make matters worse, since "Typhoon" had begun, Heeresgruppe Mitte had lost some 35,000 men excluding the sick and injured.

In spite of the terrible arctic conditions and high casualty rate, on 18 November 1941 the "Das Reich" Division continued pushing forward in a two-pronged assault. Within a week the SS units had gallantly fought their way to the River Istra and established a bridgehead. After crossing the river, "Das Reich" attacked approaching enemy forces and put them to flight. What followed was a bitter and bloody battle for the town of Istra and the surrounding area. When the SS finally captured the town, a fully fledged attack on Moscow began in earnest on 27 November. During this decisive phase of Operation Typhoon, the "Das Reich" Division seized Yssokova and soon reported it was closing in on the city. However, after a few days of continuous heavy losses from combat and the cold weather, the SS units were becoming steadily ground down in a battle of attrition. By the end of the month, the "Der Führer" Regiment had lost huge quantities of men and equipment and the depleted 2.Bataillon assigned its survivors to other parts of the regiment. "Deutschland" too had also suffered at the hands of strong Soviet resistance, and its 3.Bataillon had to be broken up.

Despite repeated stubborn attacks by "Das Reich" and its Wehrmacht counterparts, despair gripped the Heeresgruppe Mitte front as battered and exhausted troops froze to death in front of the Russian capital. German territorial gains that winter were limited to a 40-mile belt on the approaches to Moscow.

The failure to capture Moscow had been a complete disaster for Heeresgruppe Mitte. Its forces had changed out of all recognition from their victorious summer operations. The "Das Reich" Division was just one of a number of German divisions that had been badly mauled by the traumatic events. The division had lost more than half of its initial strength and could not sustain such high losses for much longer. By January 1942, Waffen-SS units had suffered immeasurably at the hands of the Red Army and the bitter winter. In total some 8,500 had been killed, with another 29,000 missing or wounded. Yet, in spite of ongoing high casualty rates, the SS soldiers remained enthusiastic as long as their division was able to perform its usual offensive actions. But not even the elite units of the SS could defeat the overwhelming might of the growing Red Army. Its renewed pressure on the German lines throughout February was enough to cause "Das Reich" further losses in men and equipment. Thus, it was reluctantly withdrawn from the front before it was completely annihilated.

During late February 1942, "Das Reich" recuperated and was temporarily renamed "Das Reich" Kampfgruppen. After receiving 3000 new men to replenish its battalions, the "Der Führer" Regiment became a Panzergrenadier unit. By March, the new SS-Kampfgruppen was back in action taking up positions along the River Volga. For two months "Das Reich" fought a series of heavy battles and once again was seriously mauled by heavy Soviet attacks. The "Deutschland" Regiment was almost annihilated by the fierce unceasing fighting. Luckily for this SS regiment, and indeed the fortunes of the entire Kampfgruppen, the Soviet counteroffensive abated to allow German forces along the Eastern Front time to rest and lick their wounds. Two months later, "Das Reich" returned to Germany to undergo reorganization and receive yet another name. In November, it became known as the SS Panzergrenadier-Division "Das Reich". It also acquired a panzer battalion containing three companies and Pz.Kpfw.III and IV tanks. In addition to these changes, the "Der Führer" Regiment now became fully motorized. The Reconnaissance Battalion exchanged its motorcycles for Schwimmwagen cars and became 1.Bataillon of the newly established "Langmarck" Regiment.

In November 1942, the "Das Reich" Division and several other formations moved south and occupied Vichy France. At the end of the year, "Das Reich" underwent further changes. It received a self-propelled gun battalion containing three batteries, each possessing seven guns. In addition, the "Langmarck" Regiment was disbanded. Some of its men were reassigned to the Panzer-Bataillon, while 1.Bataillon resumed its role as a separate reconnaissance unit.

By December 1942, the division was reorganized as it prepared to return once more to the Eastern Front to help repel strong Soviet forces in Heeresgruppe Süd in the Ukraine.

"Das Reich" arrived in the southern sector of the Eastern Front in January 1943. Here it saw extensive fighting against the Soviet 3rd Guards Tank Army. Near the city of Kharkov its forces maintained a bridgehead between Volokomovka and Kupiansk on the River Oskol. Weeks later, what followed was a bitter and bloody battle for the city of Kharkov along with I.SS.Panzer-Korps. After the city was captured by the Red Army, "Das Reich" and other premier SS units were assigned the task of its recapture. In early March, the SS Panzer-Korps, along with "Das Reich", attacked Kharkov in a savage battle for possession. By 15 March, the Germans had destroyed the last remnants of the Red Army garrison at a tractor factory just east of the city.

Without spending much time to savor their achievement, "Das Reich" moved out of the smoldering city and underwent more reorganization and re-supply in order to compensate for the high losses suffered during the Battle of Kharkov.

In July 1943, German combat formations launched what proved to be its last great offensive on the Eastern Front – against the Kursk salient. The offensive, codenamed Operation Zitadelle, would smash Red Army formations and leave the road to Moscow open. For this daring offensive, the German force was distributed between the Northern and Southern groups consisting of a total of 22 divisions, six of which were Panzer and five Panzergrenadier. Responsibility for the main attack fell to 9.Armee in the north. There were some 335,000 soldiers, 590 tanks and 424 assault guns. In the south, the Germans fielded a much stronger force and concentrated 349,907 troops, 1269 tanks and 245 assault guns. Although it was a formidable assembly of firepower with 102 Tiger tanks, it was in fact facing an even greater enemy coupled with almost impregnable defensive belts. In front of the Soviet defensive fortress stood the cream of all the German combat formations at Kursk, the premier divisions of the Waffen-SS. In Heeresgruppe Süd these elite soldiers were deployed for action, ready at a moment's notice to fight their way through the formidable lines of barbed-wire entanglements, minefields and antitank guns. Here, II.SS.Panzer-Korps, commanded by SS-Obergruppenführer Paul Hausser, formed part of 4.Panzer-Armee. The Korps comprised the three premier Waffen-SS divisions, "LAH", "Das Reich" and "Totenkopf". The three divisions had a line strength of 390 of the latest tanks and 104 assault guns between them, including 42 of the Army Group's Tigers. At their starting positions, the three SS divisions covered a sector 12 miles wide. "Totenkopf" occupied the left flank of the advance, "LAH" was in the center and "Das Reich" held the right.

During the days that followed, the Red Army, despite continuing to incur huge losses in both men and weaponry, deprived the SS of even tactical superiority. Against these elite troops they constantly strengthened their defenses through reinforcement, skillfully deploying mobile armor and antitank reserves to compensate for their high losses. Within days the Russians had managed to grind down many of the Wehrmacht units, including those in the SS.Panzer-Korps. Through sheer weight of Soviet strength and stubborn combat along an ever-extending front, the German mobile units were finally forced to a standstill. On 15 July, "Das Reich" made contact with 7.Panzer-Division. However, the Russian offensive to the north of the salient was now threatening the rear of 9.Armee, and it was forced to begin a planned withdrawal westwards to avoid encirclement. Following its withdrawal, almost all offensive action around Prokhorovka ceased and German forces in the area went over to the defensive. Operation Zitadelle was a catastrophe for German forces on the Eastern Front. Despite German efforts to batter their way through, they had neither the strength nor the resources to do so. The cream of the German Panzer force, so carefully concentrated prior to the operation, was exhausted, and the Russians had undeniably gained the initiative in the East. The campaign in Russia would now consist of a series of German withdrawals with the Waffen-SS fanatically contesting every foot of the way.

But even as Zitadelle was drawing to a bloody conclusion, II.SS.Panzer-Korps was not there to see the end of the battle; the remnants of their exhausted and battered units had already been hurriedly ordered to pull out of the Kursk area to the relative calm and quiet of Kharkov to wait for new orders. Before "LAH" departed for Italy, it turned over all its remaining armored fighting vehicles to "Das Reich". Both "Totenkopf" and "Das Reich" were detached from "LAH" and redeployed to the Donetz Basin on 25 July 1943.

On the Eastern Front, the fighting had intensified. The Russians were determined not to allow the Germans any respite and so launched a massive attack, overrunning Feldmarschall von Manstein's positions on the River Mius. Both "Totenkopf" and "Das Reich" were rushed north to protect Manstein's left flank. In the southern sector of the Eastern Front, troops frantically withdrew as strong Russian forces smashed through the Mius defenses and advanced at breakneck speed towards Stalino and Taganrog, along the northern coast of the Sea of Azov. Although SS troops of "Das Reich" and "Totenkopf" distinguished themselves with bravery, they could only manage to stem the Red Army for short periods of time.

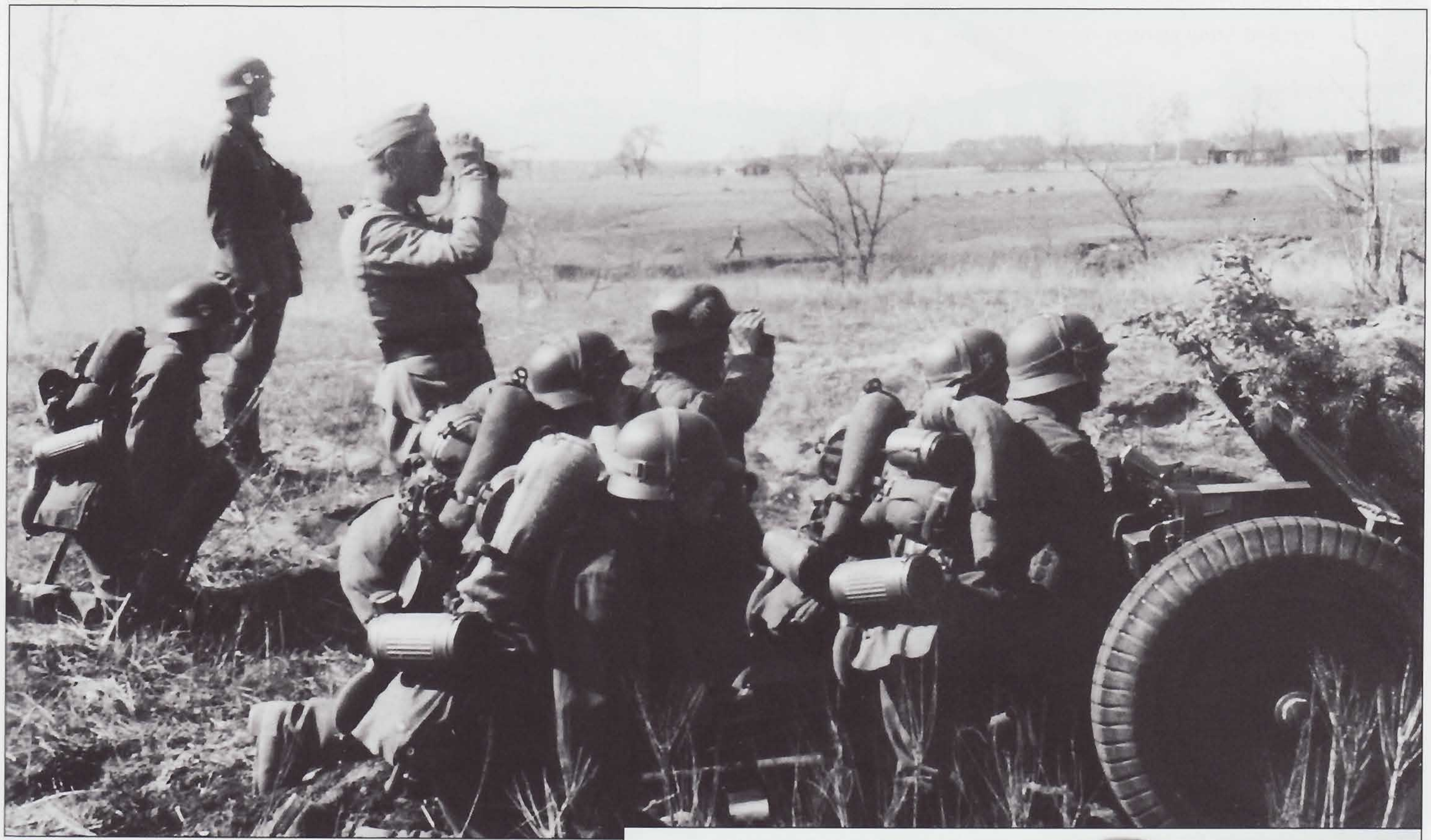
Throughout the ominous weeks that followed, the German frontlines were pulled further westwards with "Das Reich" defending, attacking and counterattacking as the situation demanded. A number of the battles fought in this sector of the front were owing to the efforts of the SS, but it came at a high price in blood.

During the winter of 1943-44, a feeling of despair and gloom gripped the German frontlines. In the "Das Reich" area of operations, the division also fought well and with distinction to prevent the Russians from marching across the western Ukraine. However, the unrelenting fighting had proven to be more than even "Das Reich" could endure. Consequently, by December 1943, it was no longer capable of carrying out the tasks given to a full-strength division, and orders were issued to create a Kampfgruppen from the units still fit for action. On 17 December, the Panzer Kampfgruppen was constructed out of Panzergrenadier-Regiment "Das Reich". The Kampfgruppen consisted of 1.Bataillon "Deutschland" and 2.Bataillon "Der Führer" Regiments. Two companies constituted the Panzer-Bataillon "Das Reich", and also on strength were the reconnaissance battalion, artillery, Nebelwerfers, pioneers, a heavy infantry-gun company and two self-propelled gun companies. The strength of Kampfgruppe "Das Reich", as it was now called, would remain on the Eastern Front while the remaining elements returned to Germany for a refit.

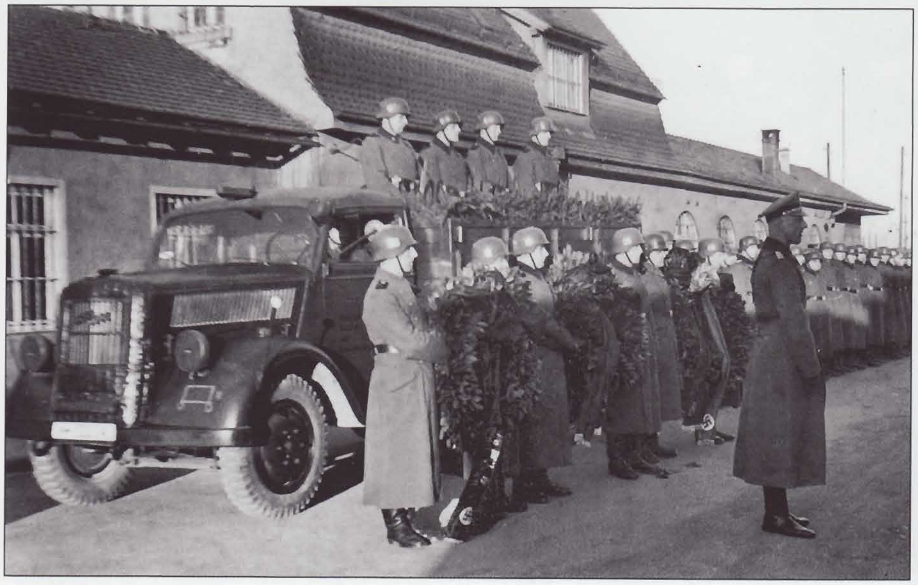
In January 1944, "Das Reich" was rushed to what became known as the Korsun Pocket where more than 30,000 Wehrmacht troops were trapped. They were among the rearguard units, holding fast while the bulk of the encircled troops made good their escape. "Das Reich" suffered heavy losses as a result of their self-sacrifice, and out of 5000 soldiers sent to the area, some 1121 of all ranks were killed in action. In spite of the huge losses in men and equipment, some 33,000 German troops escaped with their lives. Another major disaster had been averted in southern Russia. The distinguished performances of the Waffen-SS had once again further increased its reputation as the foremost fighting machine on the Eastern Front. Following the breakout in the Korsun Pocket, the "Das Reich" Division, now totally depleted with most of its armor lost in battle, was withdrawn from the front and sent to France for rest and refitting. A Kampfgruppen from the "Das Reich" Division under the command of SS-Oberführer Heinz Lammerding remained in southern Russia to continue German attempts to try and hold back the Red Army.

In April 1944, a battered and badly depleted "Das Reich" was withdrawn from the front and sent to the West for resting and refitting. Of the 2500 soldiers of the "Das Reich" Kampfgruppe, only around 800 soldiers reached Toulouse in the southwest of France to rejoin the rest of their division.

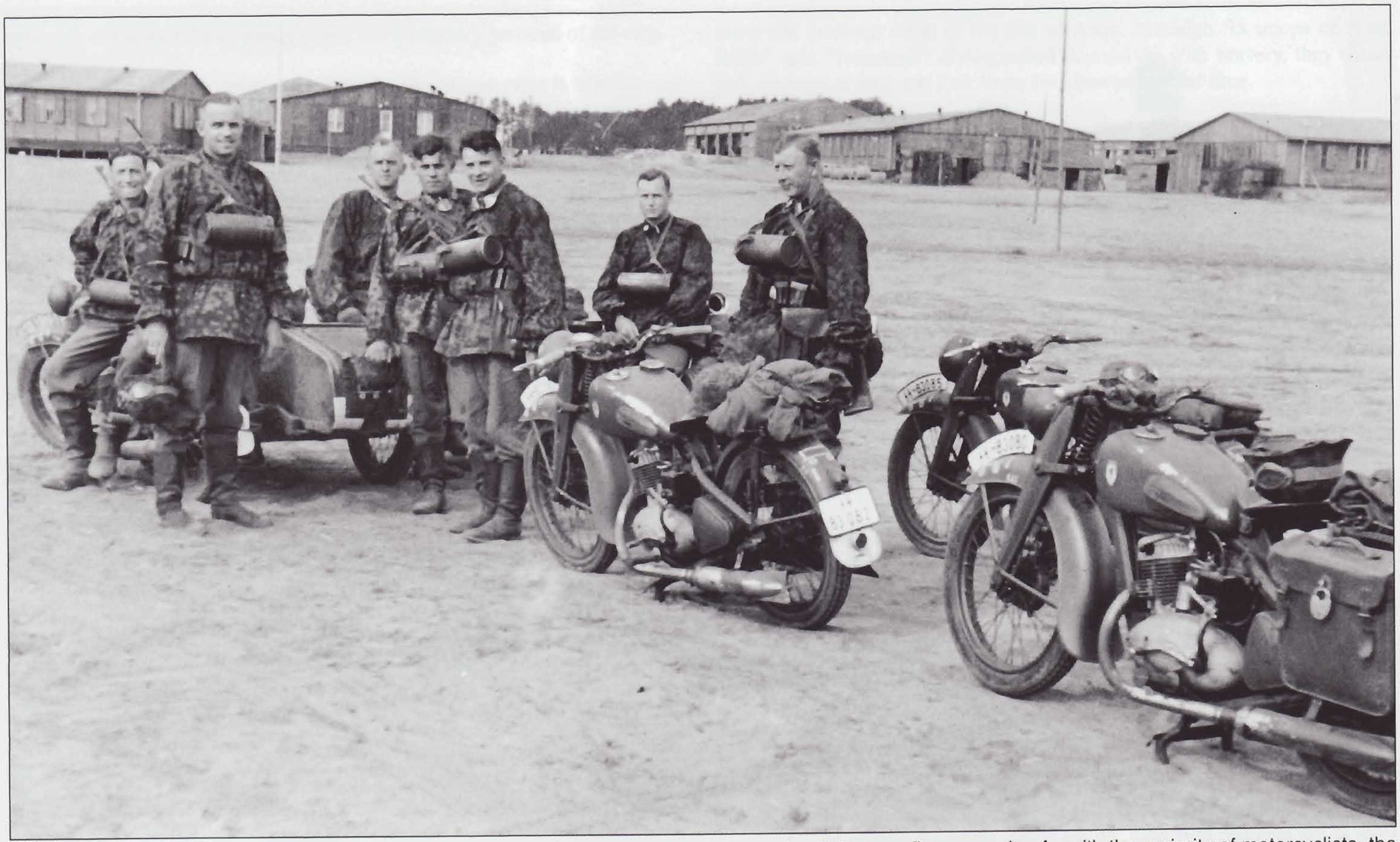
In January 1945, "Das Reich" saw action once again on the Eastern Front, this time in Hungary. The division had just arrived straight from the Ardennes offensive, but it was not the same mighty SS combat formation that had fought previously in the East. "Das Reich" doggedly defended its ground, but it was slowly engulfed by superior Soviet forces. By 2 April, the Russians had reached Lake Neusiedler on the border between Hungary and Austria, and two days later the last German defenders had been finally driven out of Hungary. Of the Waffen-SS divisions that had fought in Hungary, the bulk of them withdrew into Austria to defend Vienna. "LAH" and "Das Reich" were put into the line to defend Vienna, before withdrawing into the city and becoming involved in bitter fighting. However, by 13 April, the Red Army marched into the city. By this period of the war, the bulk of the premier Waffen-SS divisions were carrying out a fighting withdrawal through Hungary and Austria. In May, scattered into separate battle groups, "Das Reich" disbanded along with all the other Waffen-SS formations. Although "Das Reich" had all but been destroyed, in the eyes of the SS soldiers that marched into captivity, they had laid down their arms in the sound knowledge that no military formation in history had achieved more. They had battled across half of Russia, had shown their skill and endurance at Kursk and Kharkov, and gone on to protect the withdrawal of the rest of the German Army to the very gates of Berlin and beyond.



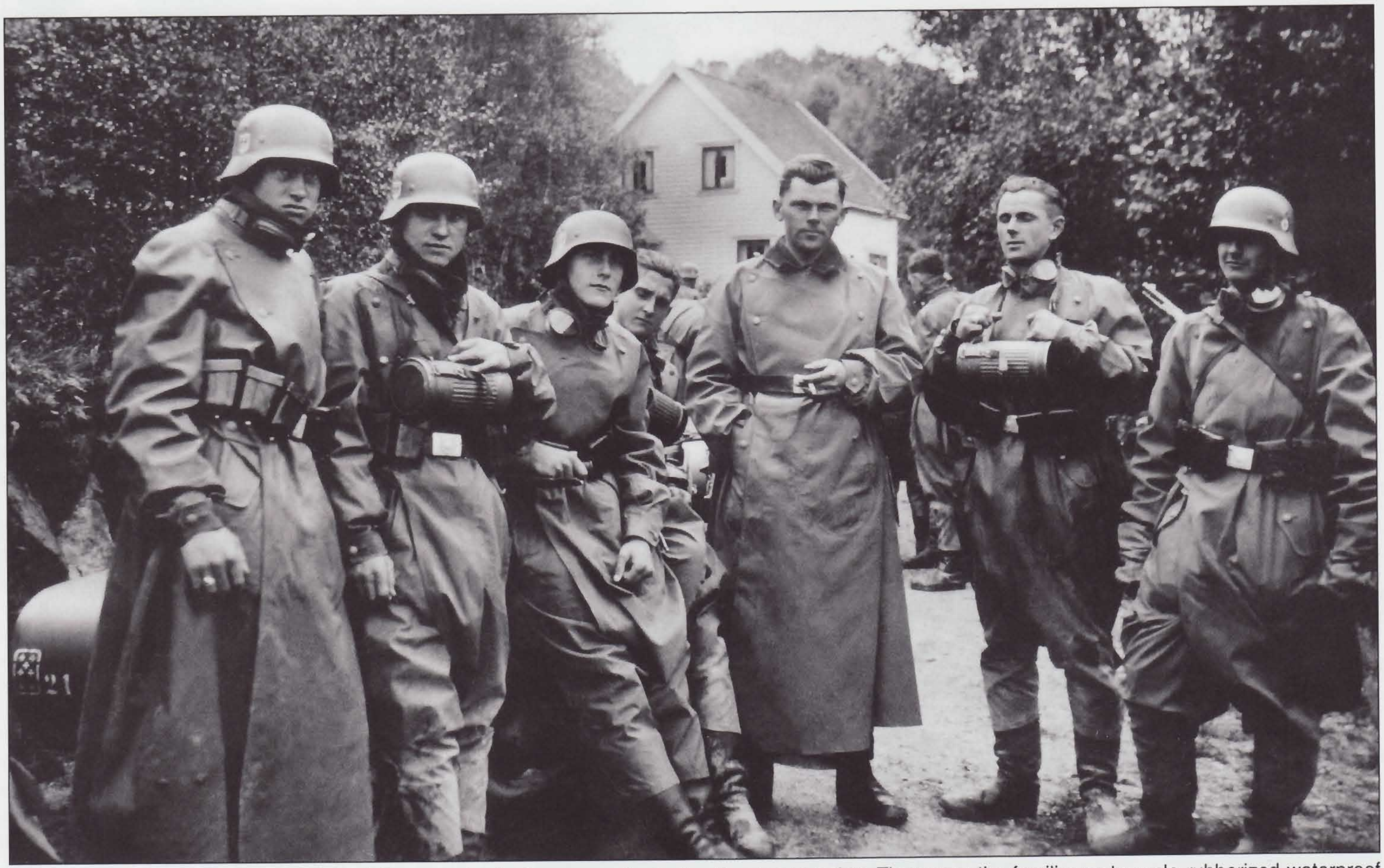
Prior to the invasion of Russia, an SS heavy weapons section is seen during a training exercise armed with a 7.5cm le.IG18 gun. In order to help conceal the weapon in open terrain, the gun's splinter shield has been camouflaged with foliage. The men exhibit an excellent display of infantrymen's combat equipment. A web battle pack carrier is attached to their Y-straps, as are the mess kit and shelter quarter. Note that all the infantrymen have the earlier type of camouflage straps around the M35 steel helmet. These were eliminated in 1940, but troops were still seen wearing them during the opening phase of Barbarossa.



One of the "Das Reich" motorized infantry Kompanies at a funeral ceremony at a barracks in early 1941. An Opel Blitz cargo truck can be seen behind the line of SS. The tactical markings painted in yellow on the vehicle's left fender indicate it belongs to a motorized infantry company.

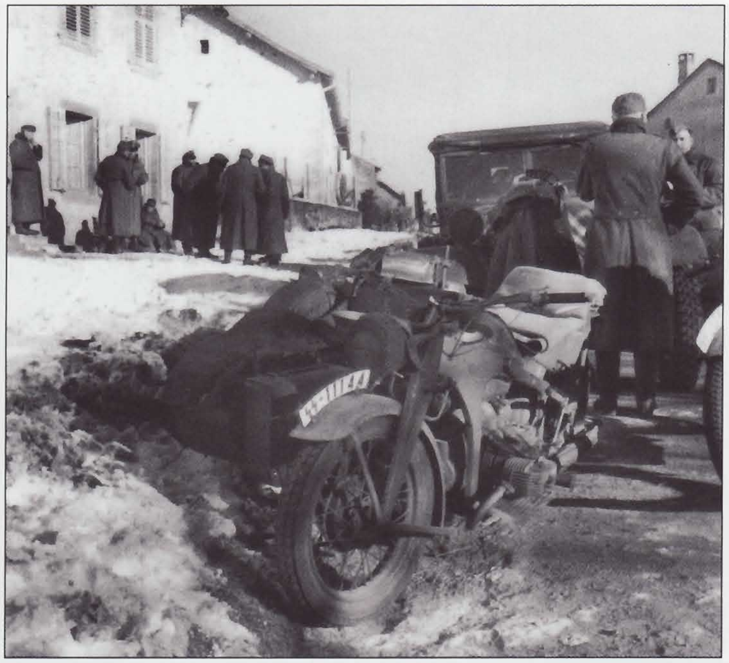


Troops rest after motorcycle training at a barrack in 1941. All the motorcyclists are wearing SS camouflage smocks. As with the majority of motorcyclists, the gasmask canister is being worn on the chest instead of the back. They wear standard-issue infantryman's equipment and weapons, including the SS enlisted man's leather belt, and rifle ammunition pouches for the Karabiner 98k rifle. They wear SS field-gray service trousers tucked into long-shaft marching boots.

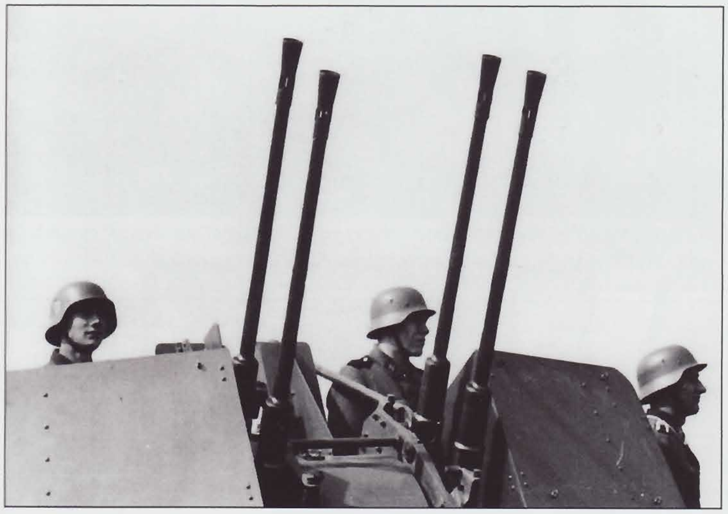


A group of SS motorcyclists during a training exercise in Germany prior to the Russian invasion. They wear the familiar motorcycle rubberized waterproof coat called a Kradmantel. The tail of the coat could be gathered in around the wearer's legs and buttoned in position to allow easier movement while on the motorcycle. Note the tactical sign of the unit, or unit markings, with motorcycle troop number "21" painted on the motorcycle combination.

One of the last parades before leaving barracks for deployment on the Polish-Soviet border in the spring of 1941. Their clean-cut appearance with no field equipment is a familiar occurrence during parades of this nature.



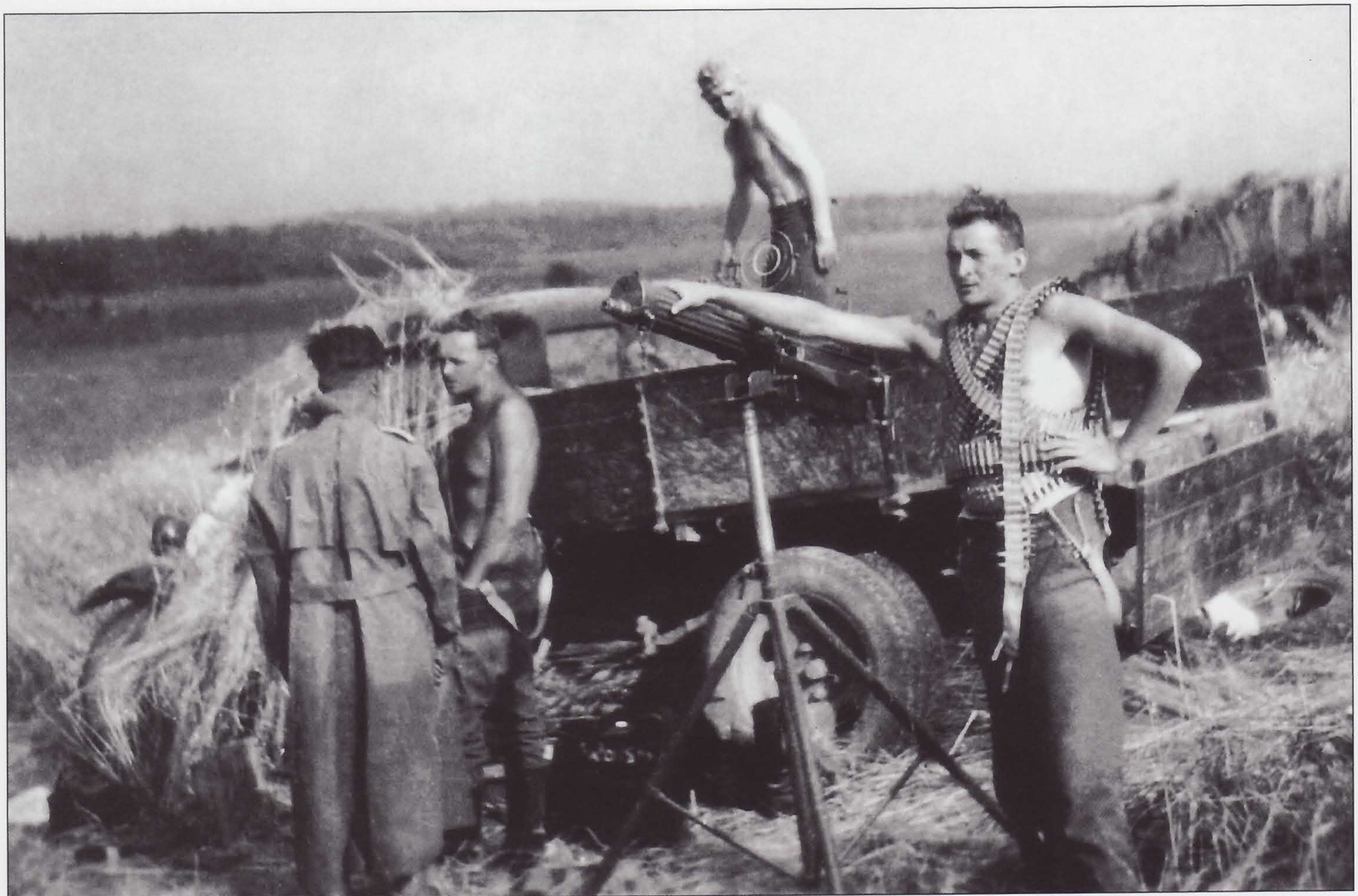
A pause during maneuvers, probably in Germany in early 1941 prior to transportation of the SS-Korps to Poland for the invasion of Russia. Here we have an interesting photograph of a Zündapp K500 with sidecar in the foreground. The motorcycle has the SS license plate "11144".



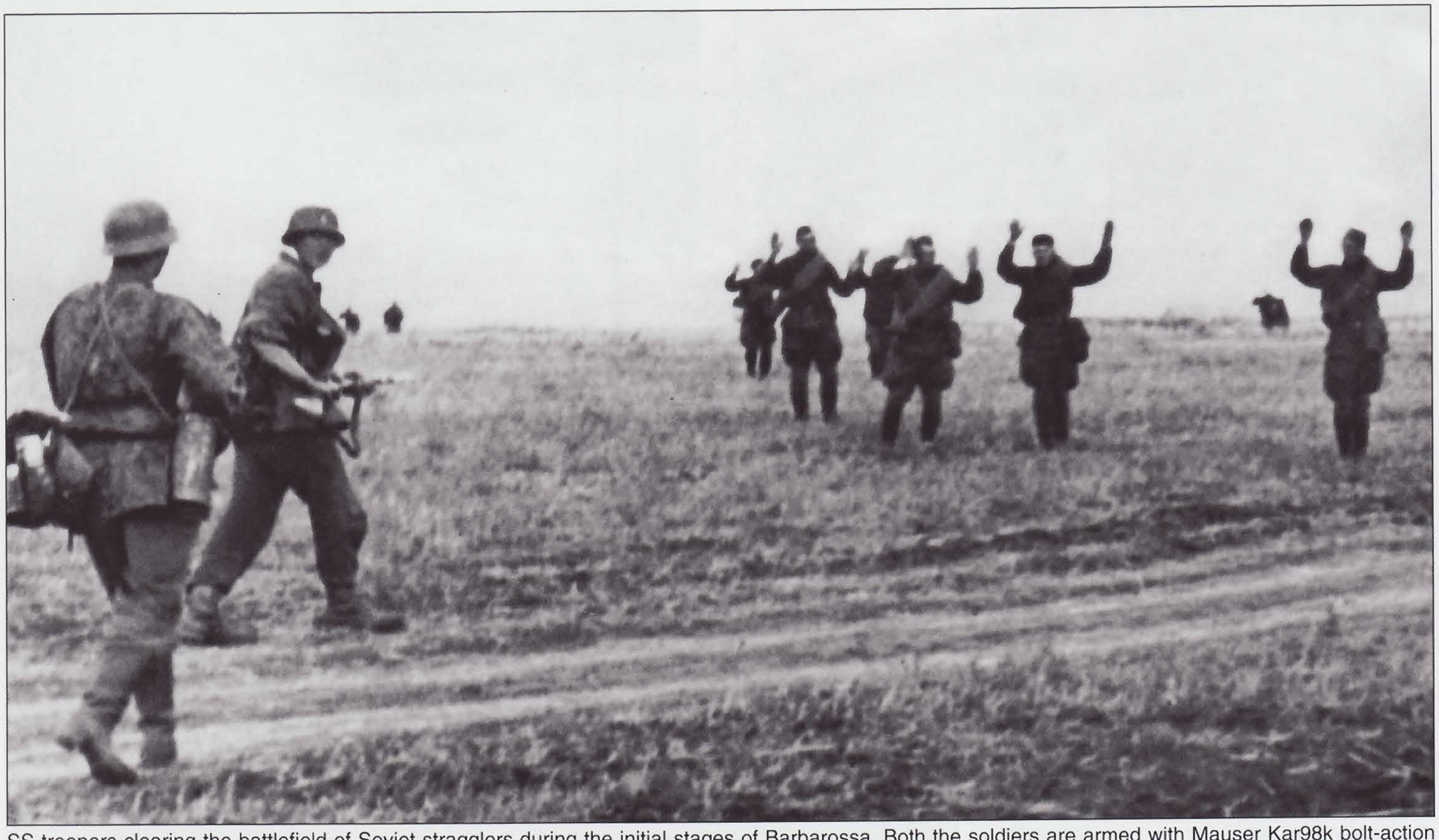
A four-barreled 2cm FlaK38 anti-aircraft gun manned by an SS crew. This lethal weapon had a very impressive rate of fire of 1800 rounds per minute, and was effective against all kinds of targets up to 3000m away. It was a valuable weapon for frontline units protecting troop and vehicle concentrations against low-flying aircraft. The weapon was issued to Waffen-SS flak units in 1941, when the first flak battalions of the SS divisions were created, including those of "Das Reich", in May 1941.

SS troops crossing the Russian frontier marked with a border stone. In the early morning of 22 June 1941, Operation Barbarossa began with the "Das Reich" Division's Artillery Regiment – along with many other German batteries arrayed along the demarcation line – opening fire, laying bare the frontier and smashing through the thinly held border.

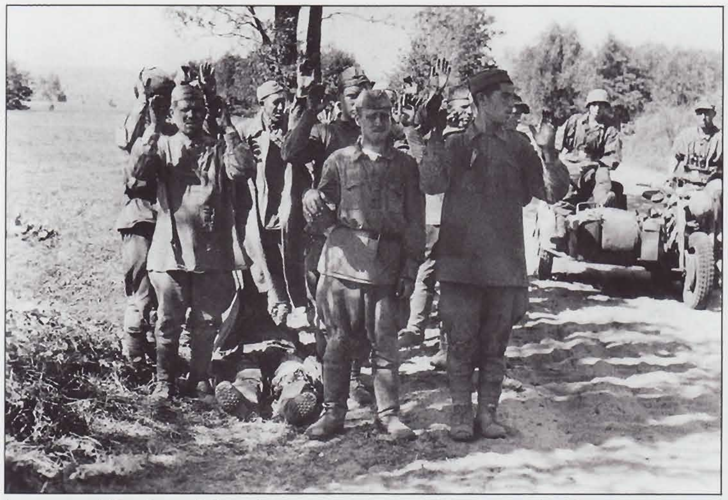
Troopers of a heavy weapons platoon equipped with various infantry equipment and ammunition enter one of the first Russian villages along the border with Poland. The "Das Reich" Division did not participate in the initial ground assault across the River Bug, but spent most of the first week of the invasion in the east directing traffic along a line of advance established for 2.Panzergruppen.



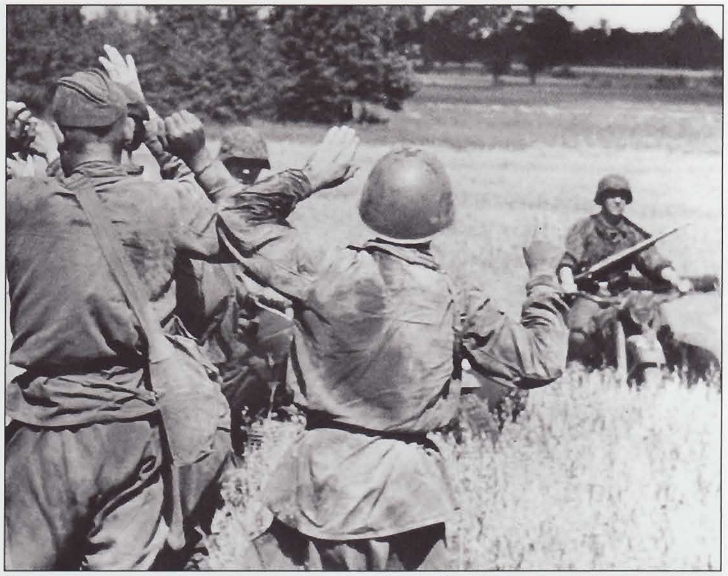
Troops during a pause in the fighting. A Soviet Maxim heavy machinegun is seen here affixed to an anti-aircraft tripod captured by "Das Reich" close to a truck that has received some camouflage. Note the weapon's circular "net" gun sight, and the ammunition belts wrapped round the machine-gunners torso.



SS troopers clearing the battlefield of Soviet stragglers during the initial stages of Barbarossa. Both the soldiers are armed with Mauser Kar98k bolt-action rifles with fixed bayonets. Note that they have full field equipment but no Y-straps. All the equipment has been attached to the standard SS infantryman's black leather belt.

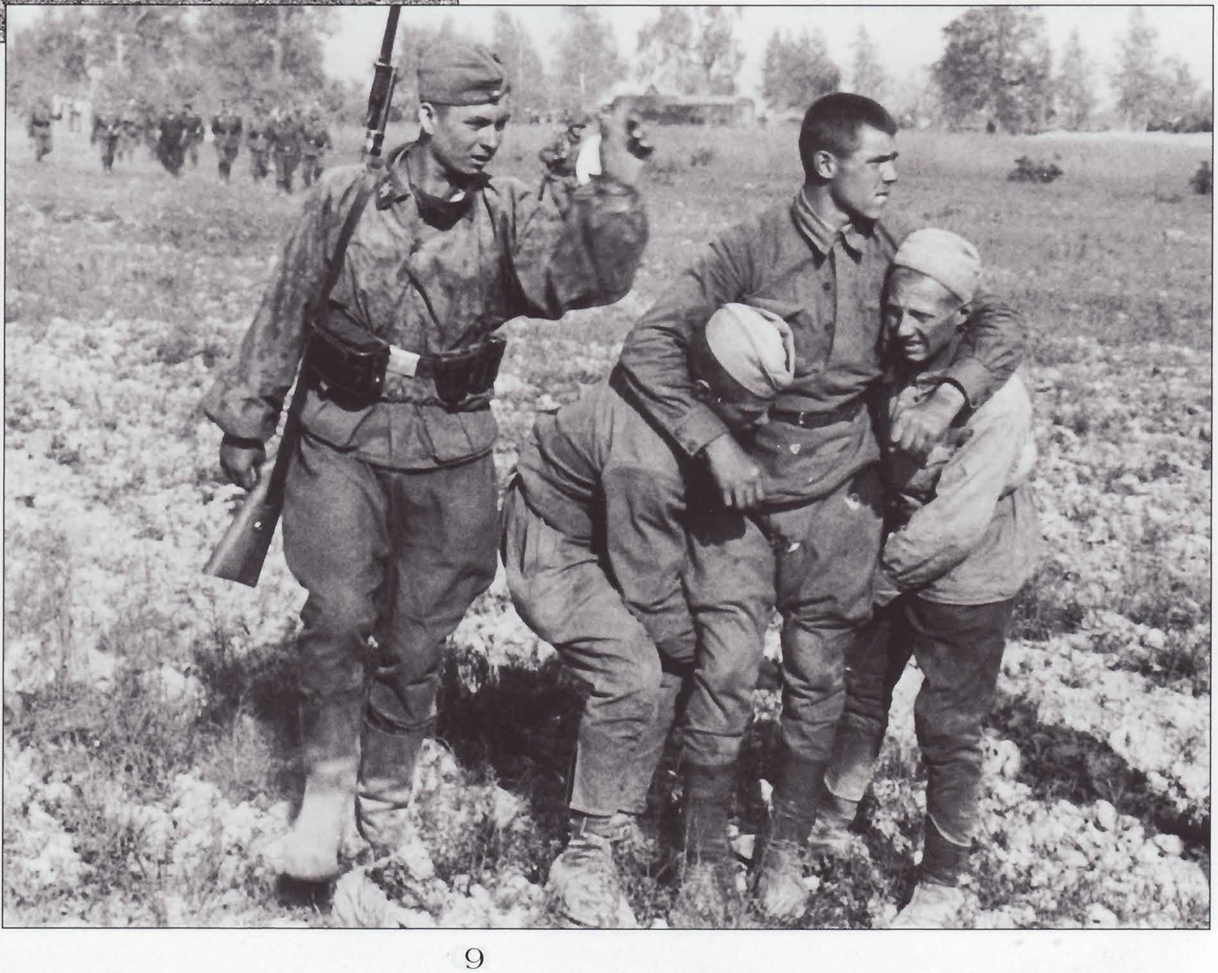


A group of Soviet soldiers has surrendered and a wounded Russian can be seen lying between them. A stationary SS Zündapp motorcycle combination is being used to help clear the local area of Russian POWs. Of interest is the large tire on the front of the motorcycle, which has been fitted to give better durability for driving across the poor Russian road system.



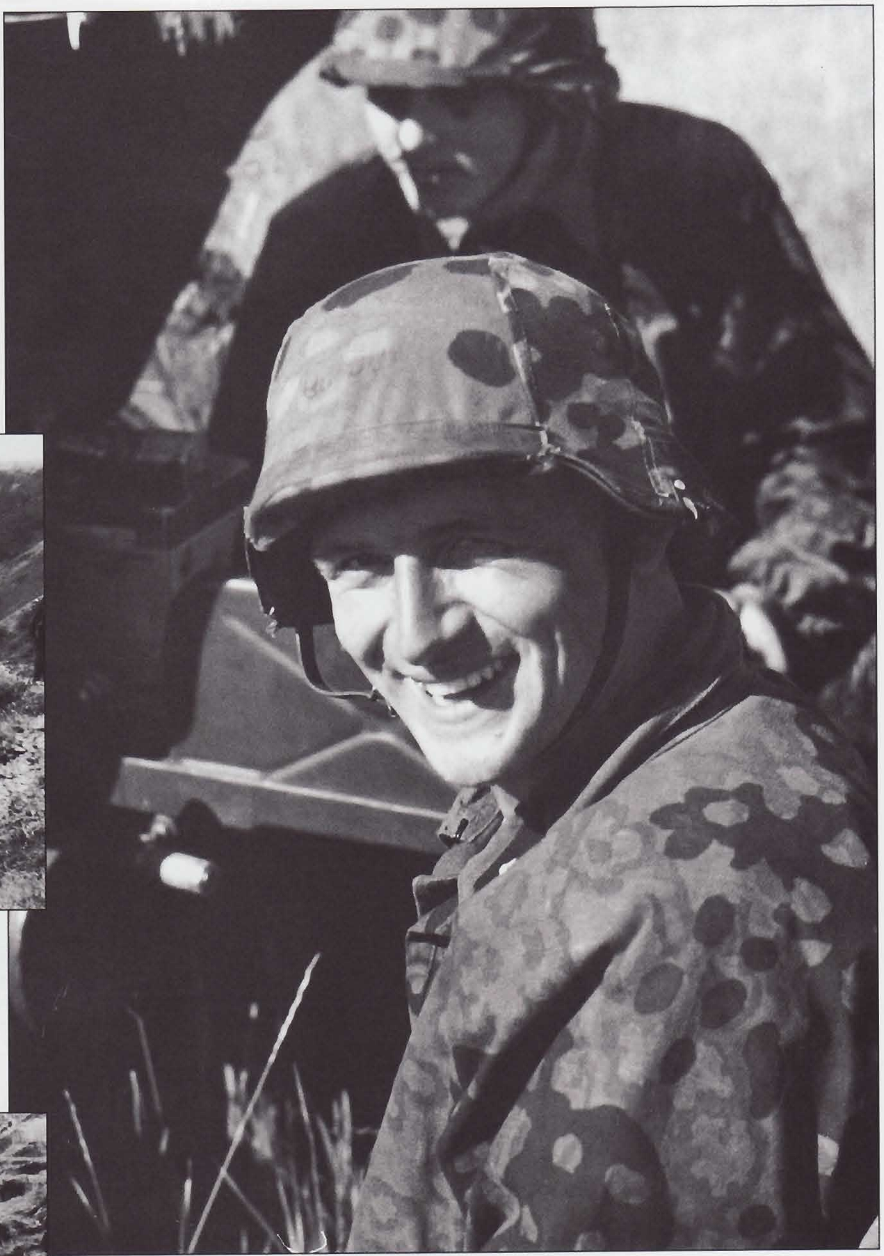
SS motorcycle combinations being used to collect a group of Soviet soldiers during the summer of 1941. During the initial stages of the campaign, many POWs were usually taken by reconnaissance troops, often by motorcyclist units. Many Soviet troops, however, were not taken into captivity and were simply murdered on the spot by the SS.

More POWs are taken into captivity, their fate unknown. All the Soviet troops are fully equipped, and one soldier is carrying a spade generally used by engineer troops. As the “Das Reich” Division moved across the Beresina and Dnieper Rivers, capturing more Russian soldiers as it advanced, SS troops were gradually confronted by scattered Soviet troops that harassed the Germans by staging ambushes and then melting into the countryside.



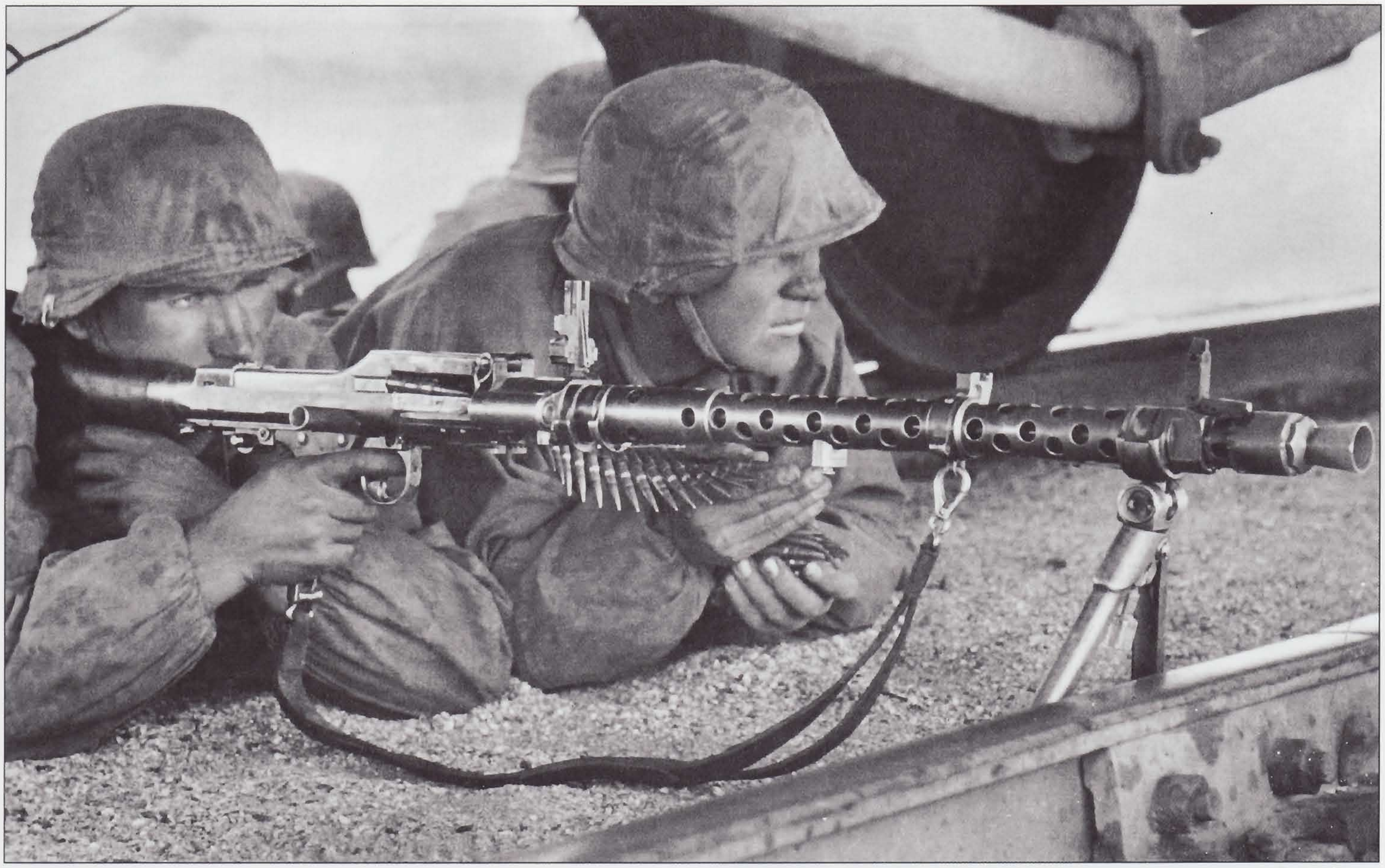
A young SS rifleman accompanies Soviet prisoners, including a wounded soldier, to the rear area. The SS soldier has no Y-straps and only one set of ammunition pouches for his Kar98k rifle. A binocular case is attached to his main belt with goggles, which may indicate he belongs to a motorcycle unit. For close-quarters contact with the enemy, the infantryman has fixed his bayonet to his rifle.

A propaganda photograph showing an SS PaK35/36 gunner smiling for the camera during the early stages of the campaign in the East. The PaK35/36 gun was the standard weapon of SS division tank-destroying battalions in the summer of 1941. The photograph illustrates an excellent study of a Waffen-SS camouflage smock and helmet cover, which has an unusual printed pattern and appears to be between the "oak leaf" and "plane tree" patterns.

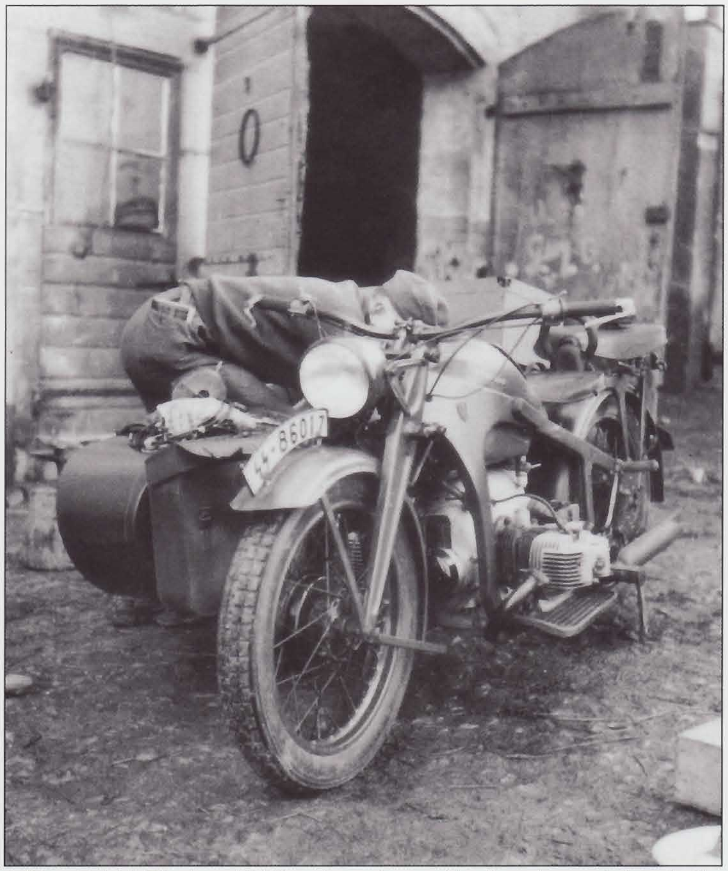


Two photographs taken in sequence showing "Das Reich" infantrymen penetrating a river somewhere in Russia in 1941. An officer holding the rank of SS-Untersturmführer can be seen, probably the commander of the troop, whilst in the other photo, infantrymen with field equipment can be seen moving through the shallow water of the river.

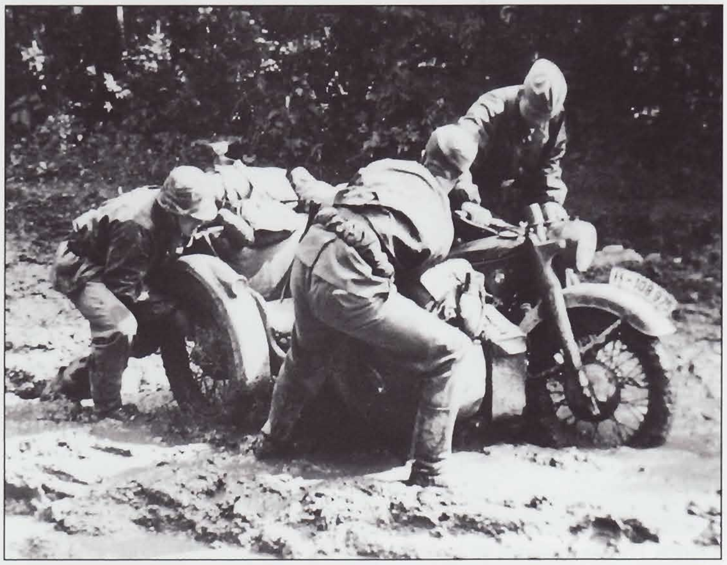
"Das Reich" troops inside a forest with their trucks. The vast distances in the Soviet Union took their toll on men and machines alike, while supply problems even during the early stages multiplied with every mile.



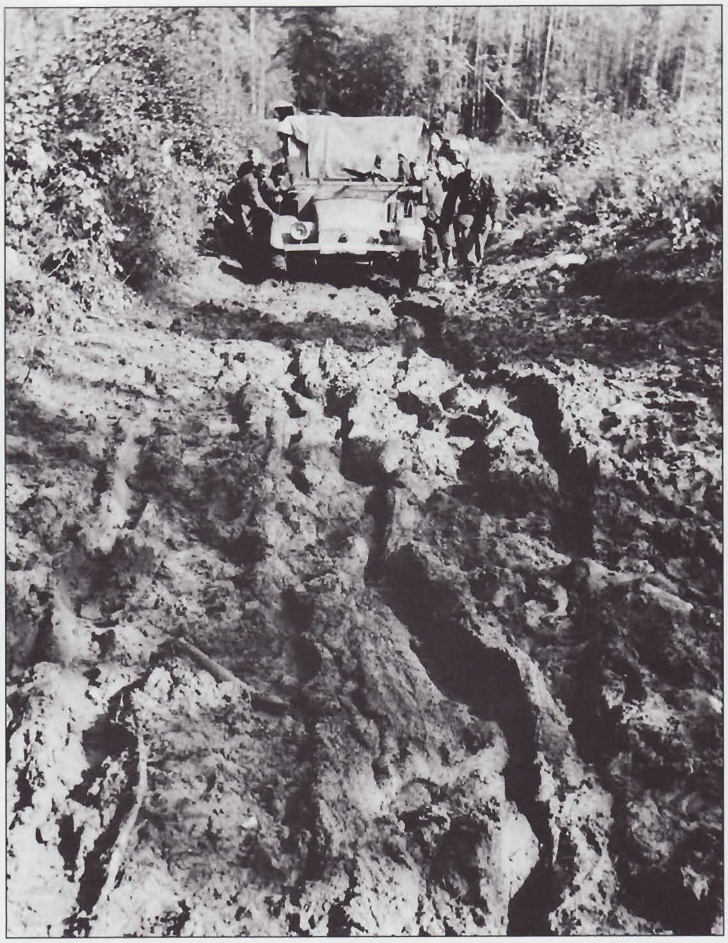
A light MG34 machinegun team with their weapon positioned on a bipod beneath a railroad wagon. Note how the soldiers' camouflage smocks have faded in color due to continual exposure to the sun, dirt and washing.



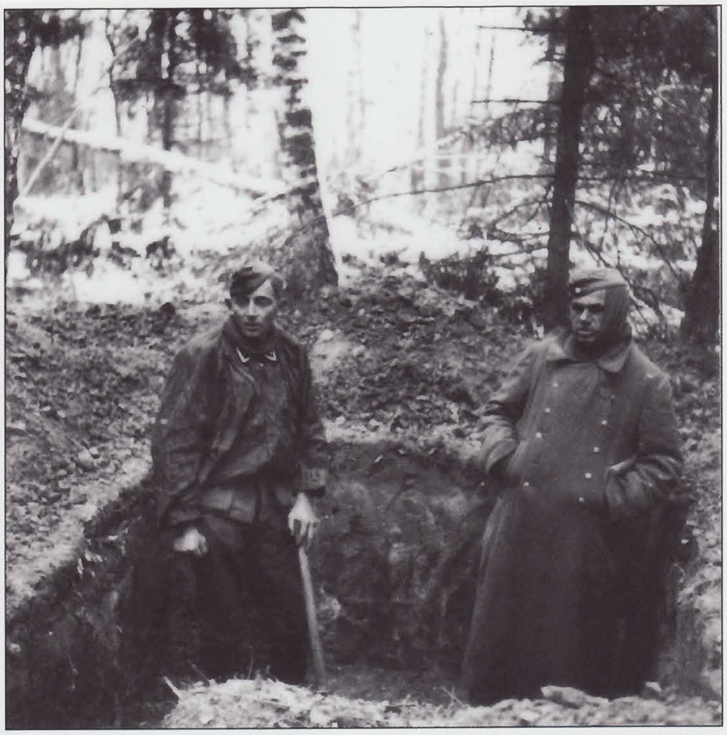
A "Das Reich" Zündapp K500 motorcycle combination at a workshop in the autumn of 1941. The registration plate "SS 86017" is visible on the front mudguard, and the company's named is stamped on the frame of the motorcycle.



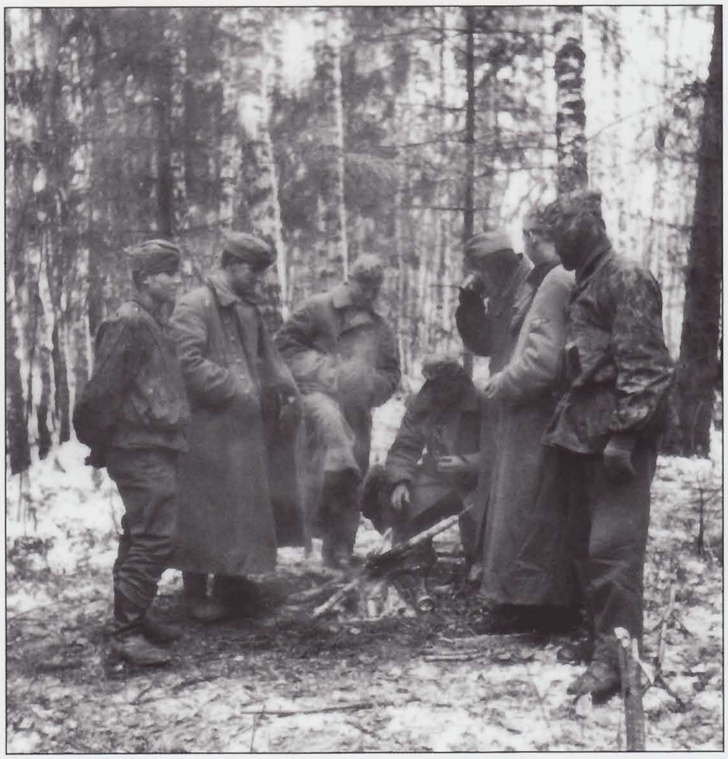
A BMW motorcycle unit of "Das Reich" struggling to move its vehicle along a typical Russian road. After a heavy downpour of rain, the roads in Russia quickly turned into quagmires that made movement, especially for wheeled vehicles, very difficult.



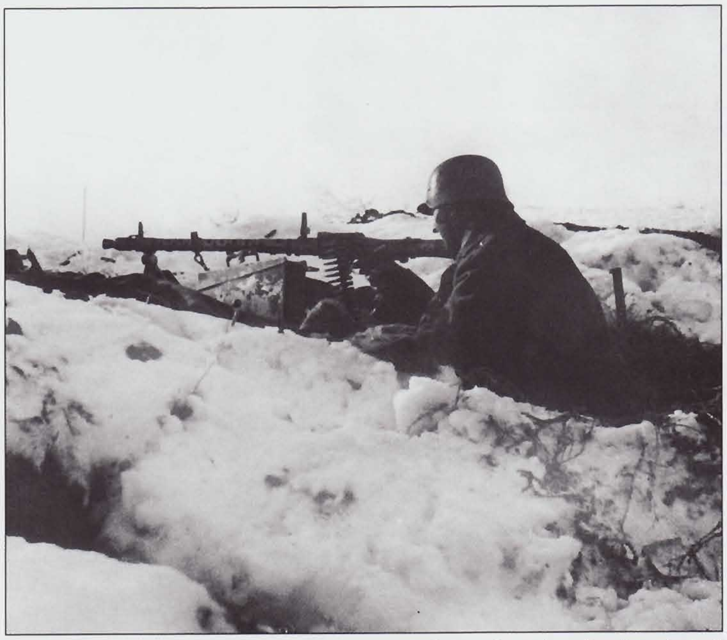
A "Das Reich" Krupp Protz light truck is being pushed by its crew along a muddy road. During "Das Reich's" advance, roads became increasingly scarcer, and those that were used by the marching column were often in terrible condition, which in turn exacerbated transportation problems.



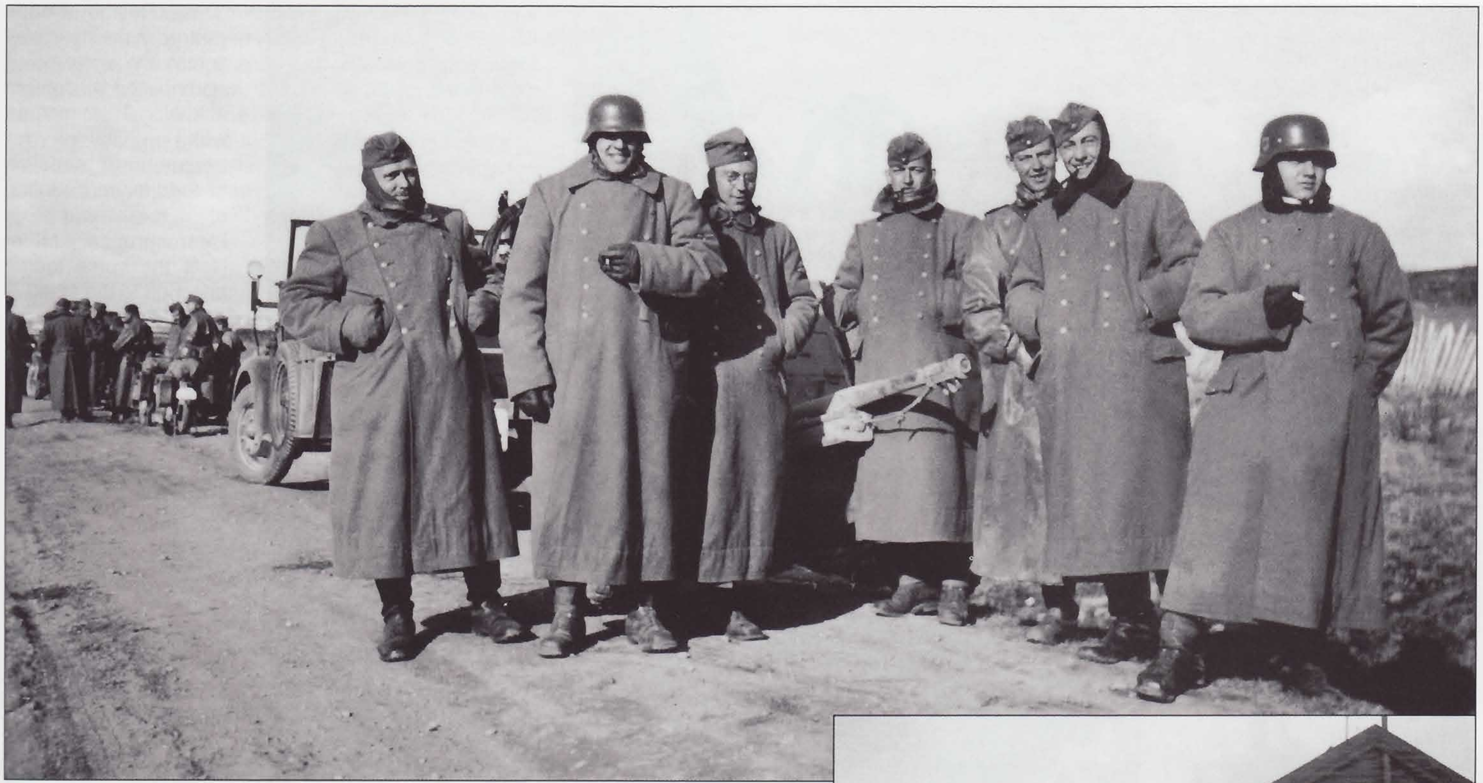
A photograph taken probably during the drive on Moscow in the late autumn of 1941. Here Waffen-SS troops, one wearing a camouflage smock and the other a standard greatcoat, are digging a trench inside a forest.



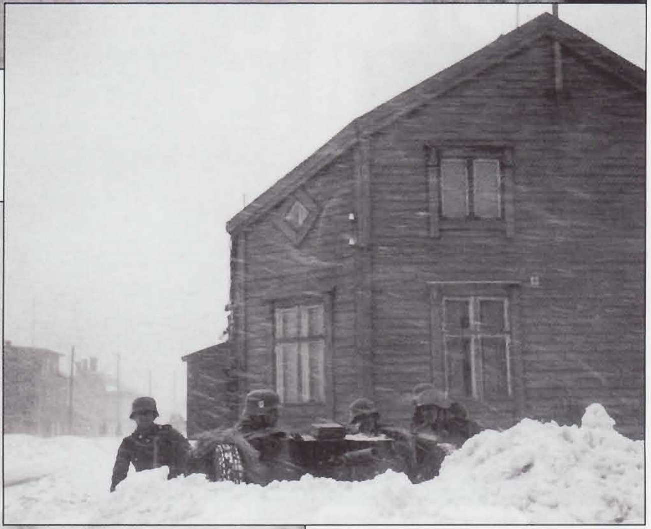
Troops huddle around an open fire during a break in the arduous job of digging a trench in freezing Russian temperatures. Digging trenches would soon become a matter of life and death for the Waffen-SS and their Wehrmacht counterparts. Digging was essential owing to massed Soviet artillery and air attacks.



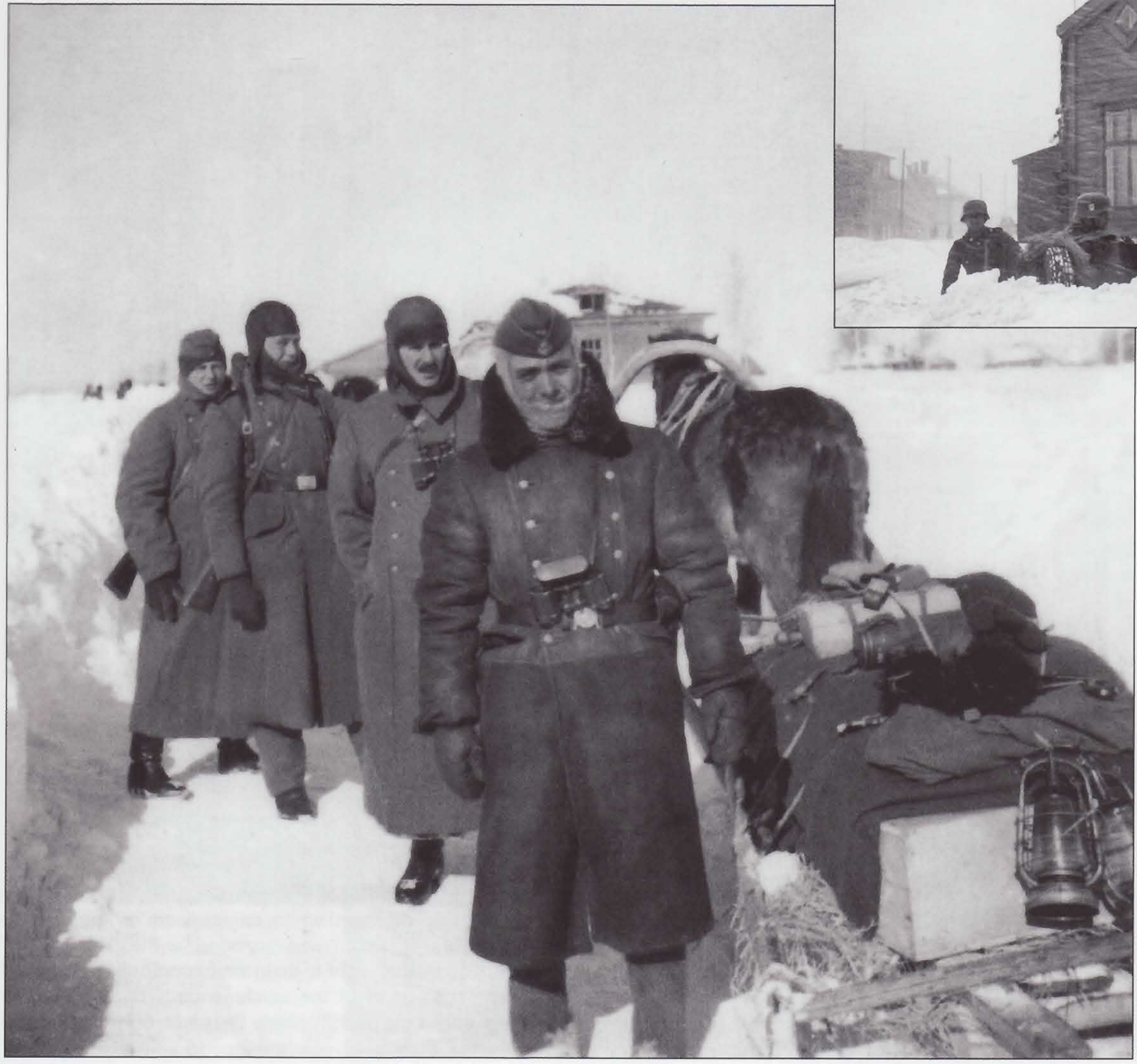
An MG34 light machine-gunner in late 1941. Several weeks after the start of Barbarossa, the wet weather turned to snow and prevented the German war machine from taking Moscow. This machine-gunner is still wearing the standard greatcoat worn universally throughout the German Army during this period. The Soviets, not surprisingly, were far better prepared for the cold months of 1941 and 1942. As natives of the area, many were already accustomed to the inhospitable climate and knew in advance how to dress for it.



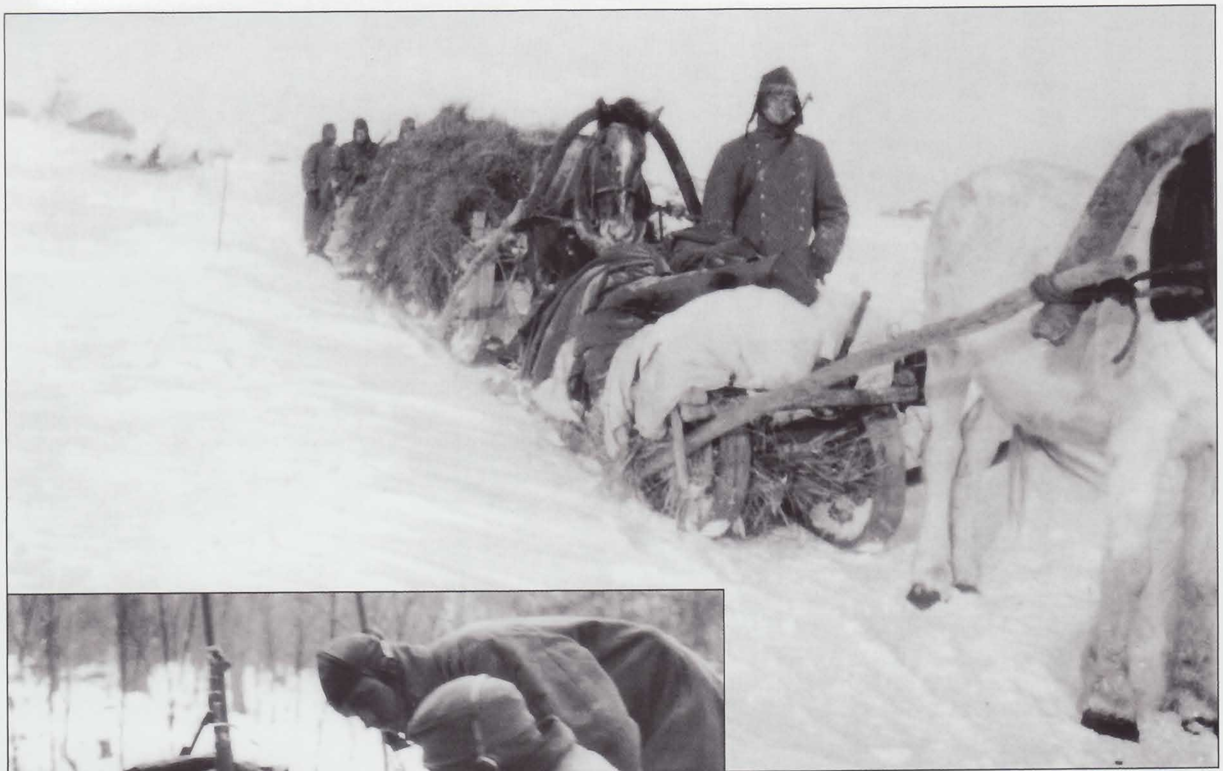
The crew of a captured Soviet 47mm M1930 antitank gun being towed by an open Kfz.4 heavy personnel carrier. The PaK crew is moving to the front and has taken a rest break, called a Feuerpause (firebreak). This was the normal term used by the Germans for a ceasefire, but it also signified a rest break.



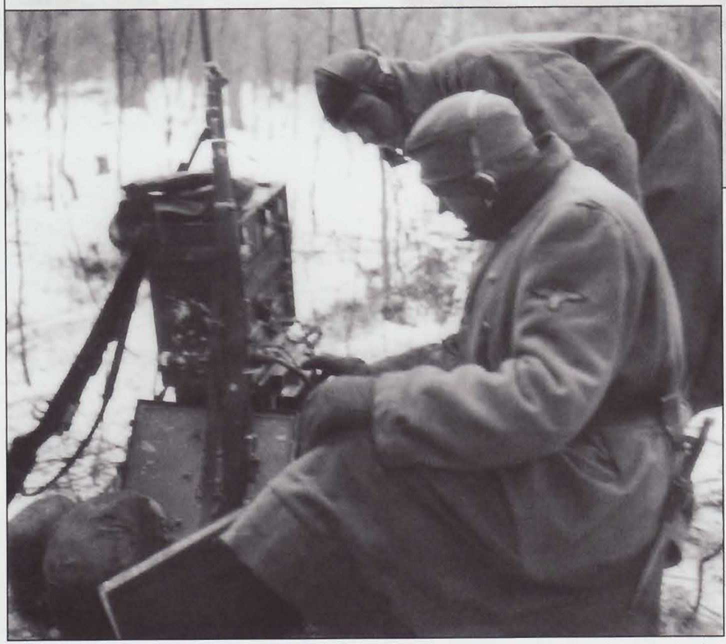
An interesting view of an SS PaK35/36 crew guarding the entrance to a Russian village in the winter of 1941-42 during a heavy snowfall. None of the soldiers has received proper winter clothing and their gun still retains its old gray camouflage scheme.



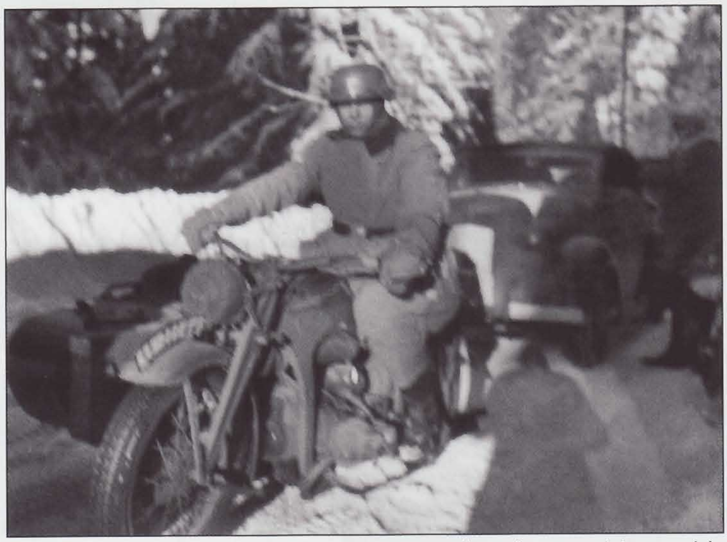
A patrol in the Russian winter presents a new type of winter uniform, this time completely improvised in the division's workshops. The soldier nearest to the camera is wearing a sheepskin greatcoat made during the winter of 1941-42. The soldier has also improvised a woolen toque around his head under the standard SS field cap or Feldmütze. The troops behind him all wear the standard field-gray greatcoat. Their field equipment is stored on Russian sleds.



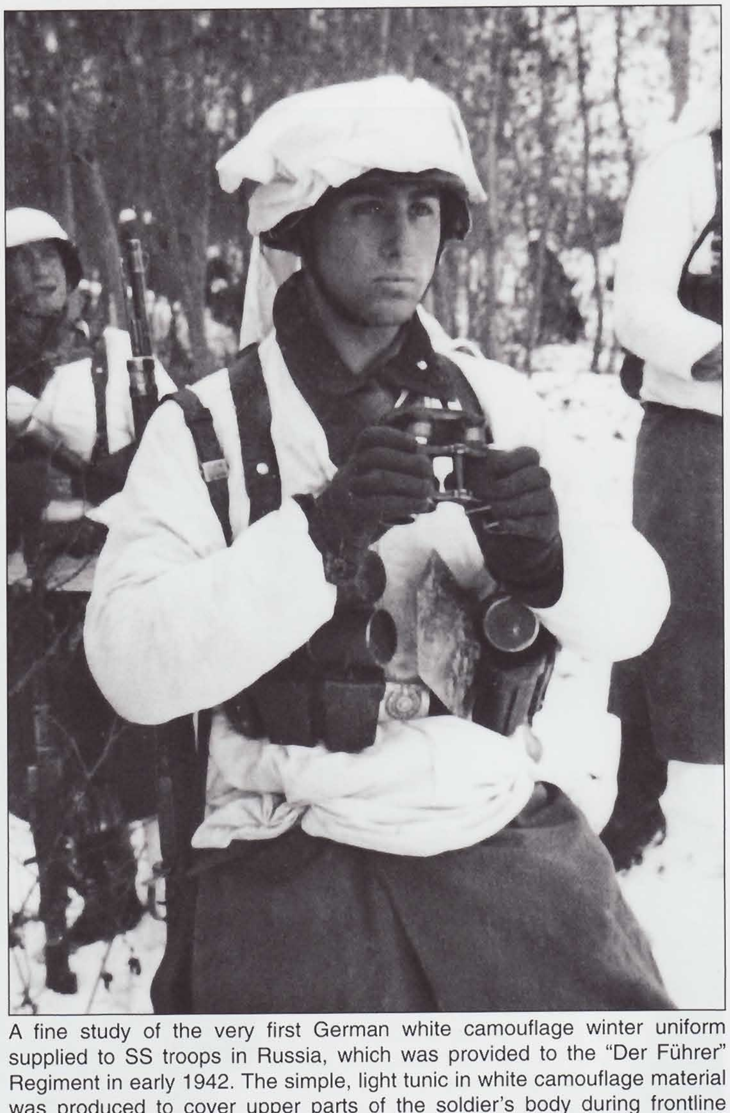
"Das Reich" troops wearily make their way across the snow using sleds pulled by draught animals. This method was vital for transporting supplies needed for continuation of the war in Heeresgruppe Mitte. Note the horse fodder attached to the sides of the sleds.



"Das Reich" radiomen in a forest with a Tornisterfunkgerat b1 (Torn. Fu. b1 (S/E), or "pack radio". These portable radio sets were widely used on the Eastern Front and were carried by radiomen in two parts on specially designed backpack frames.

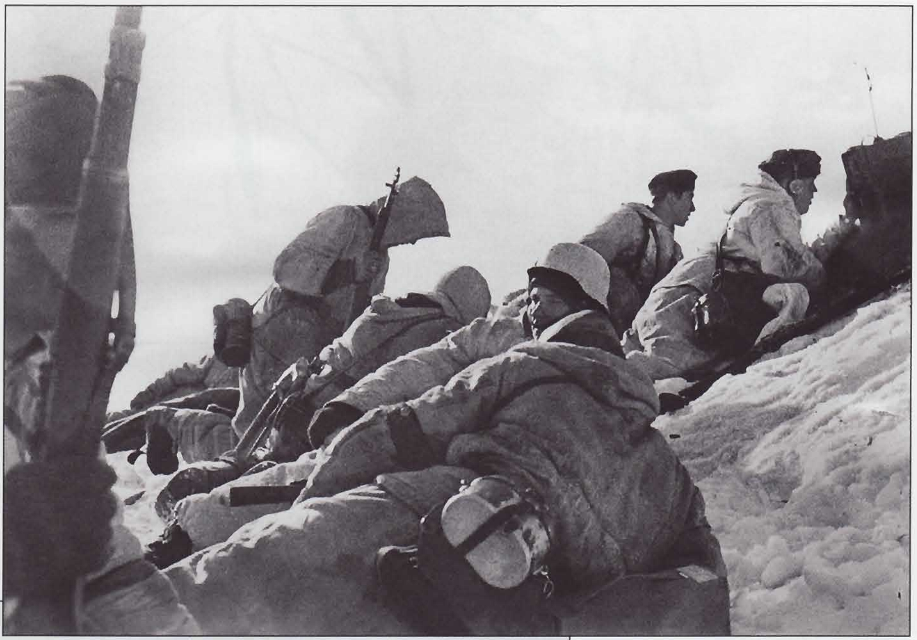


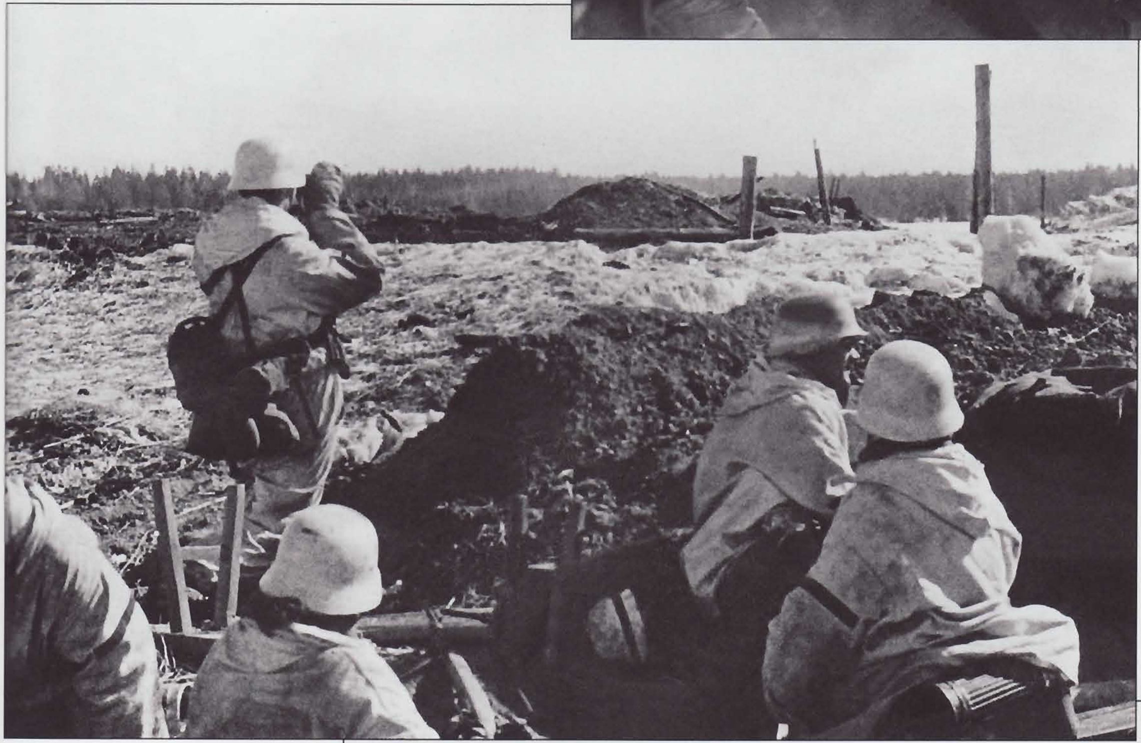
"Das Reich" Zündapp K500 motorbikes struggling along a winter road in 1942. Of special interest is the license plate on the mudguard, which is very unusual. Like most others divisions, "Das Reich" also lost much of its mobility equipment due to logistic problems and the harsh Russian weather.



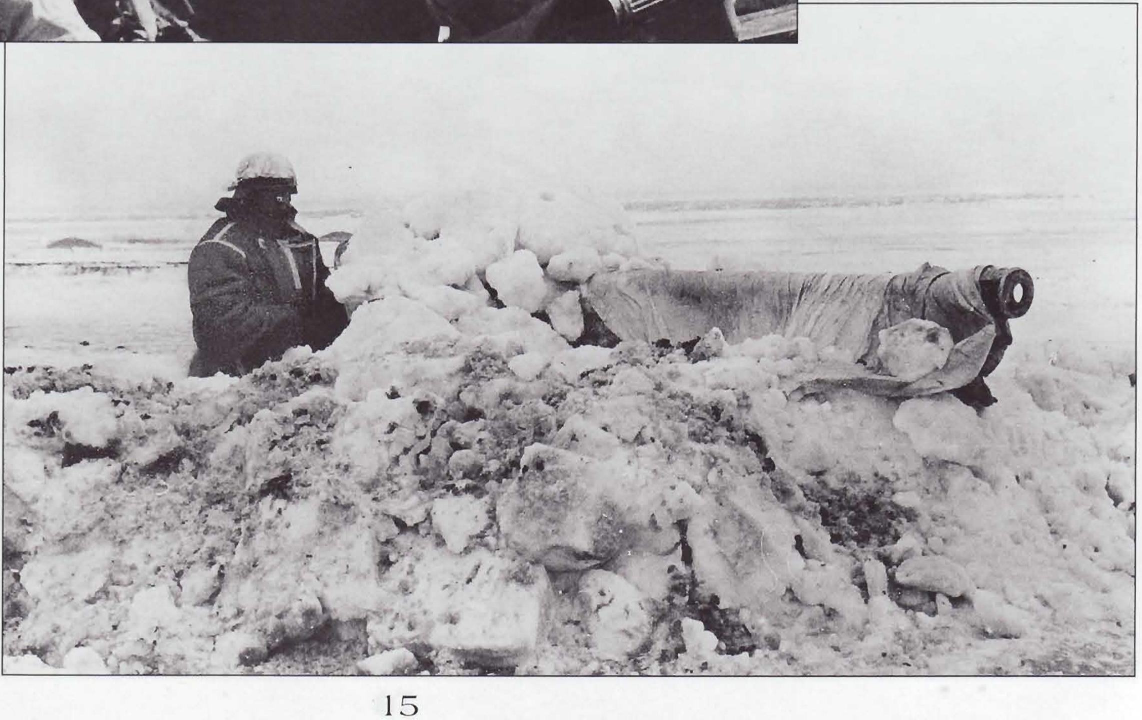
A fine study of the very first German white camouflage winter uniform supplied to SS troops in Russia, which was provided to the "Der Führer" Regiment in early 1942. The simple, light tunic in white camouflage material was produced to cover upper parts of the soldier's body during frontline combat. It was worn over the whole uniform. Note the piece of white material over his M35 steel helmet.

Troops remain under cover lying down in the snow on a steep gradient as they prepare to attack. They are all wearing the two-piece snowsuit consisting of a white jacket and white trousers. With Red Army forces wearing similar clothing, frontline German troops were issued with colored arm bands for use on their winter clothing. This enabled them to distinguish friend and foe. Note the two radio operators that have set up their TornFud 2 radio set.

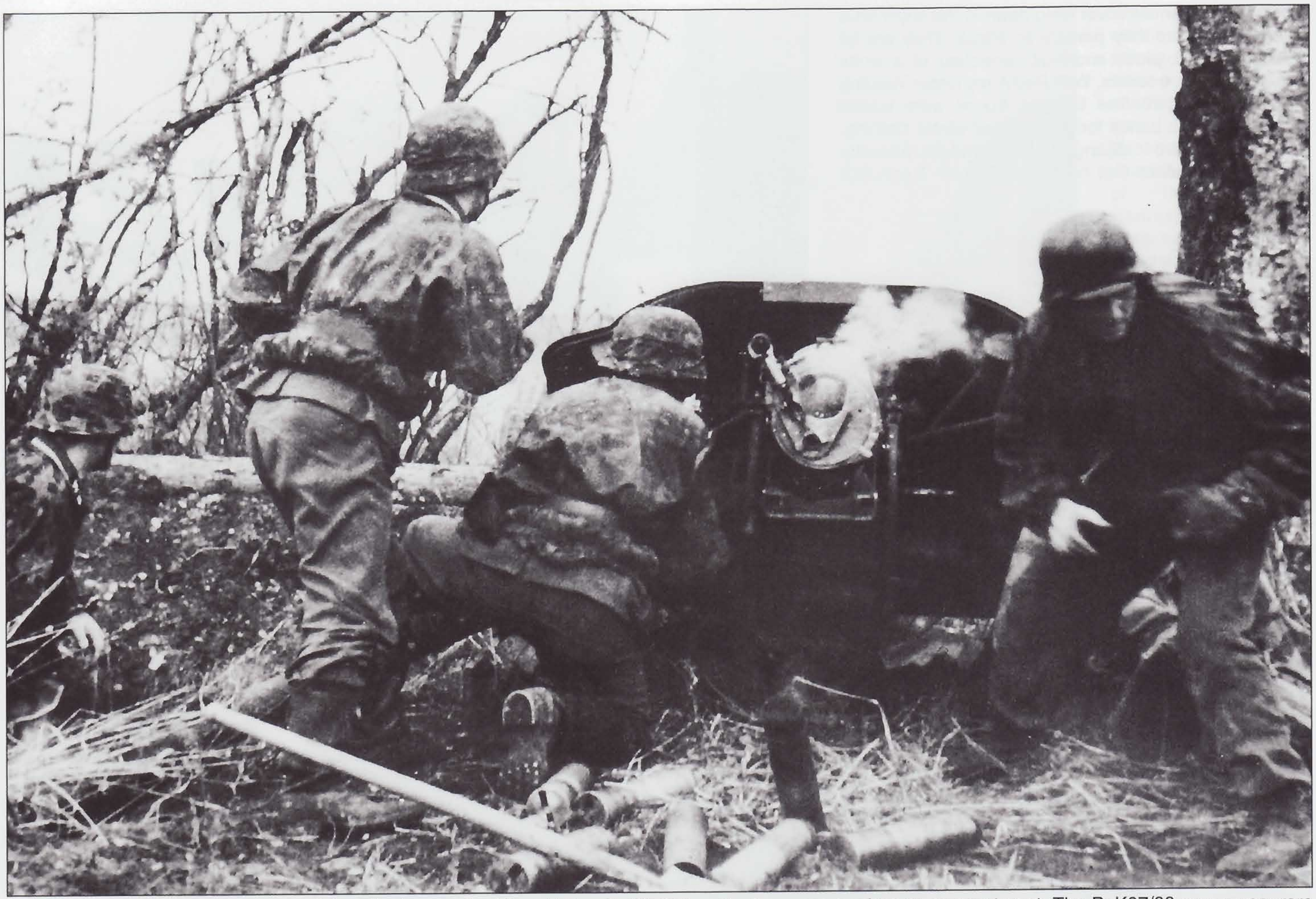




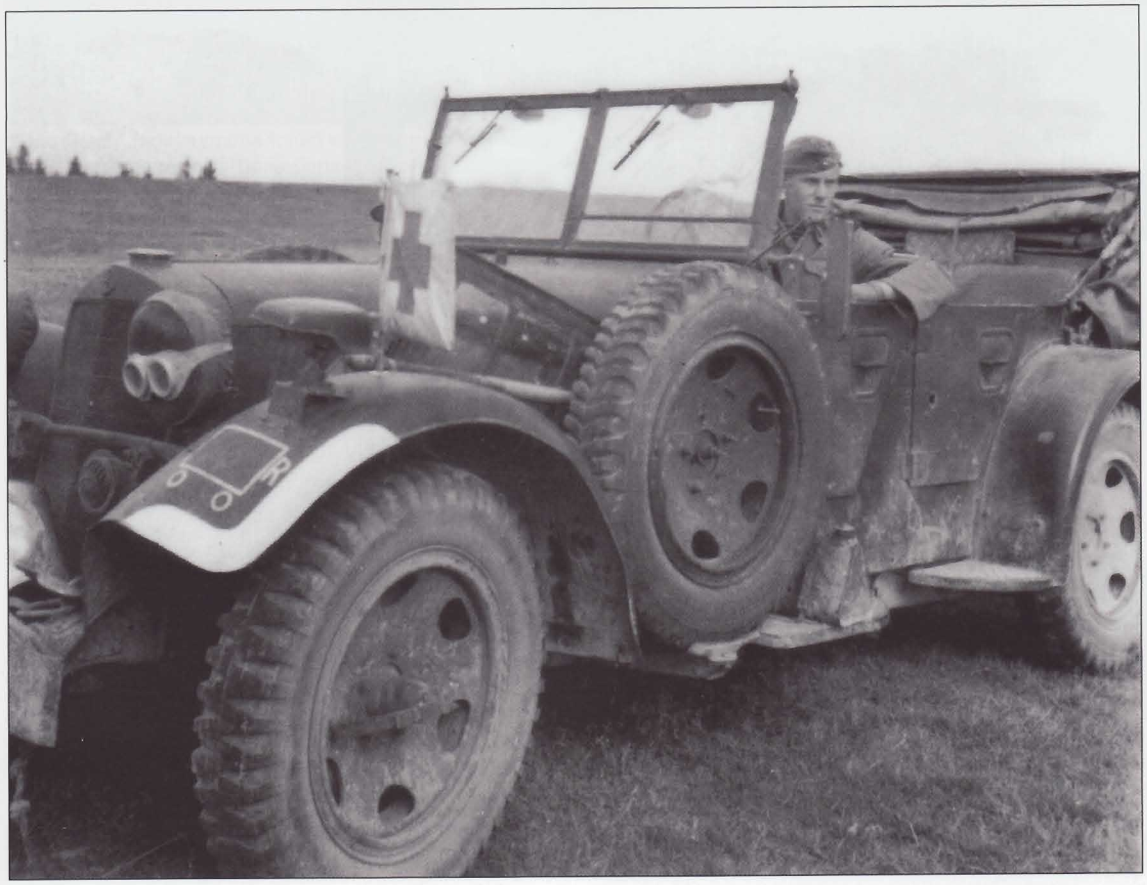
Antitank gunners in a dug-in position with a 5cm PaK38. Note the identification stripe, which is probably in green, that helps distinguish them on the battlefield as friend or foe. They are all wearing whitewashed M35 steel helmets that offer no kind of protection from the cold.



An antitank gunner with his well-concealed 5cm PaK38. Snow has been built over the gun's splinter shield, and white sheeting has afforded additional camouflage by being laid over the barrel of the gun. Out in large open spaces, troops utilized whatever means they could muster to conceal their weapons and ultimately have an edge over their opponents.

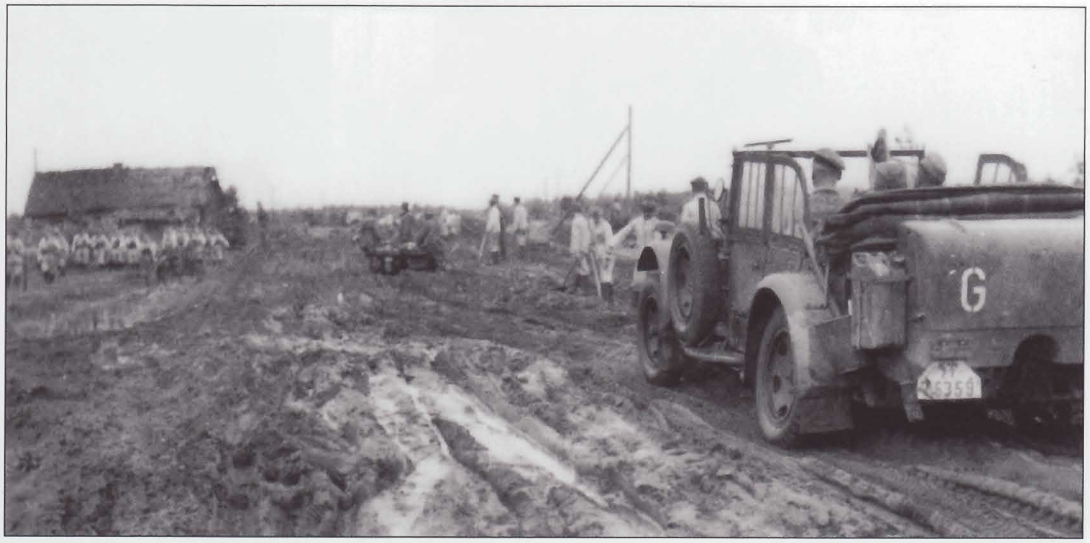


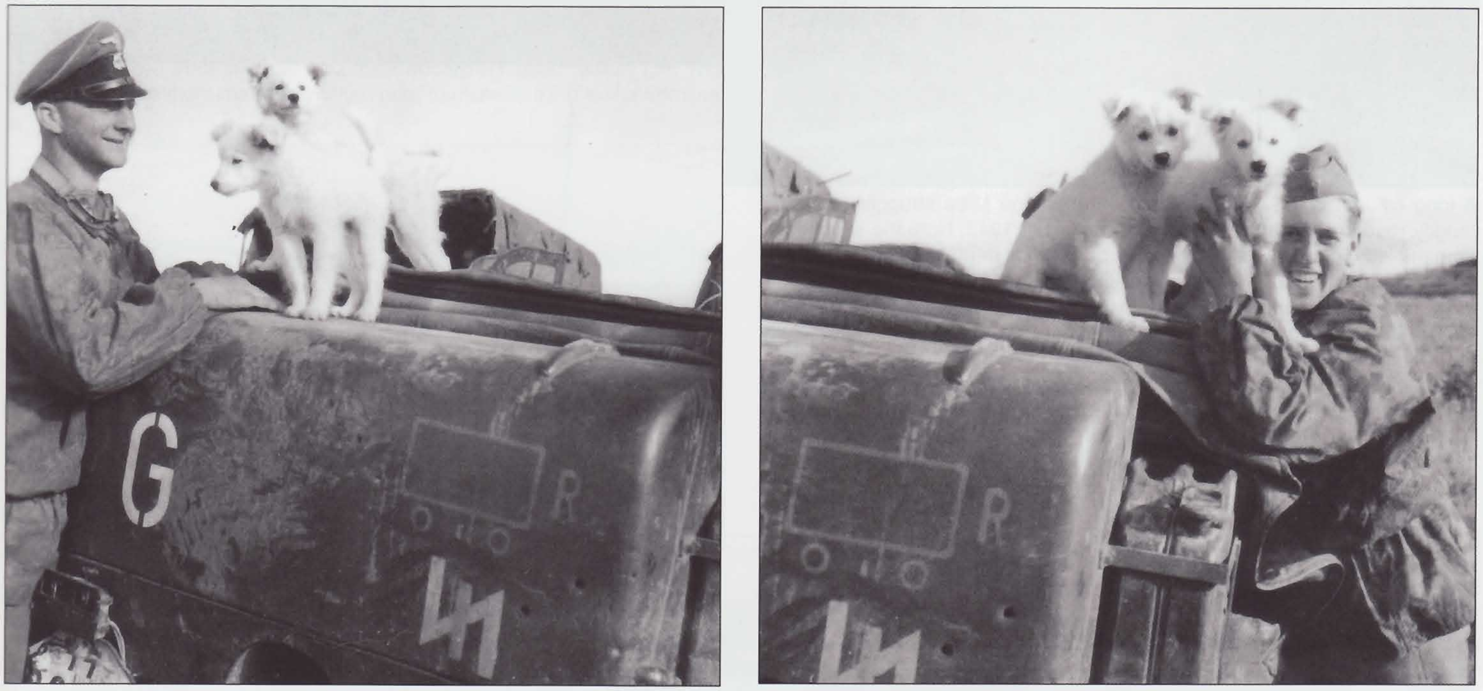
A photograph taken the moment an SS antitank crew fired their 7.5cm PaK97/38 antitank cannon against an enemy target. The PaK97/38 was a very rare weapon in the SS units in which it served, but gunners did find the weapon very effective and it was widely liked. The troops are wearing camouflage smocks printed in the "plane tree" pattern.



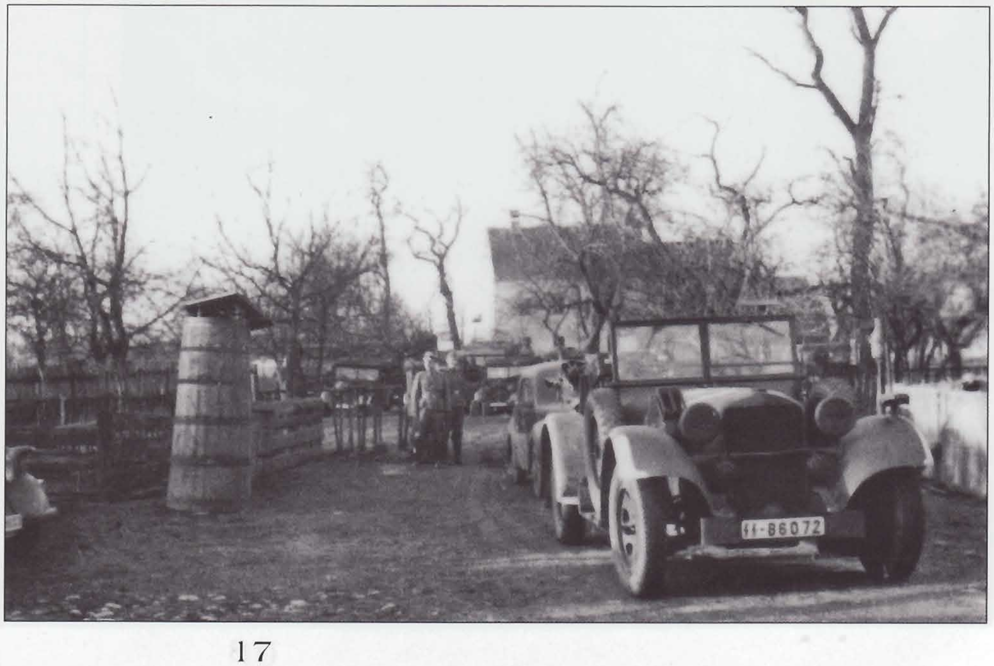
A medic troop's command staff car, as indicated by the tactical sign painted on the left fender. The vehicle is from "Das Reich's" motorized infantry regiment, and it has halted in a field.

A staff car from a "Das Reich" staff unit in the early spring of 1942. The vehicle has received an application of brown-gray camouflage. Painted in white on the rear of the vehicle is the letter "G", indicating it belongs to Panzergruppe Guderian, which operated in Heeresgruppe Mitte.

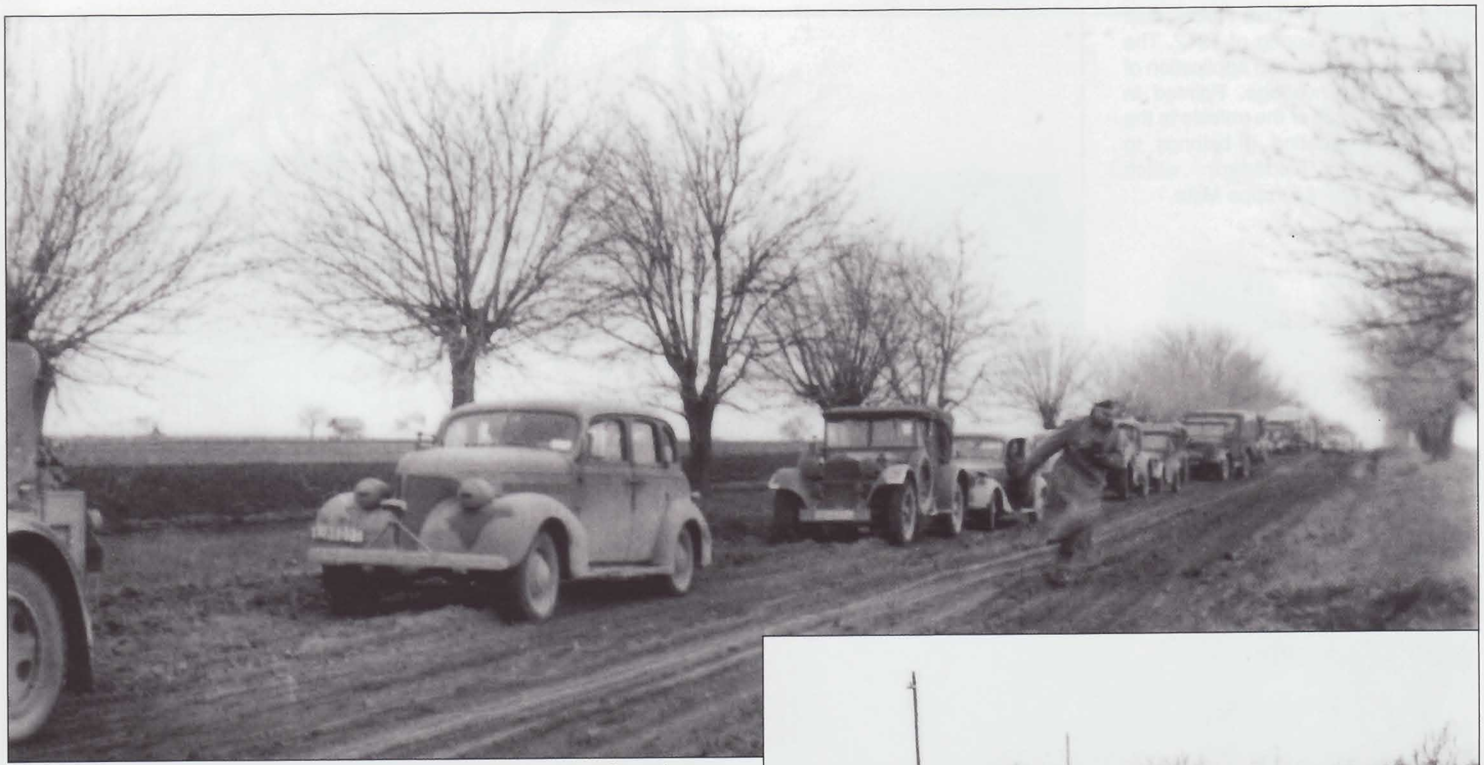




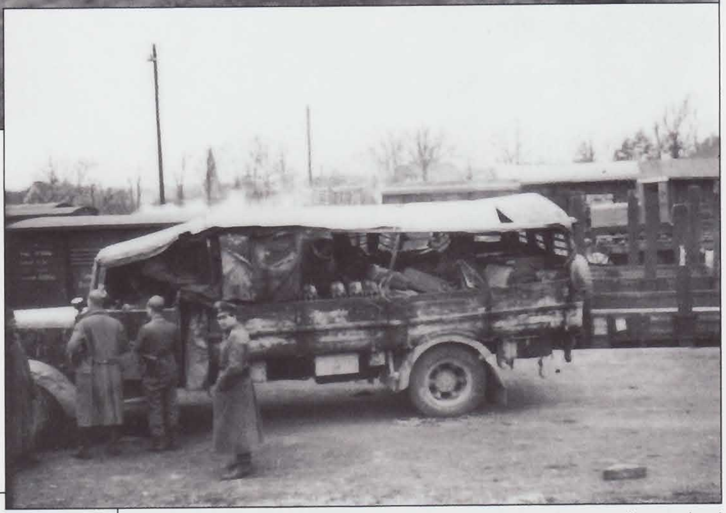
Two posed photographs taken in sequence showing a staff vehicle of the motorized infantry unit's command. The letter "G" painted in white is clearly identified on the rear of the vehicle. Next to it painted in yellow is "Das Reich's" divisional sign of a Wolfsangel. The tactical marking of a motorized regiment is painted in red.



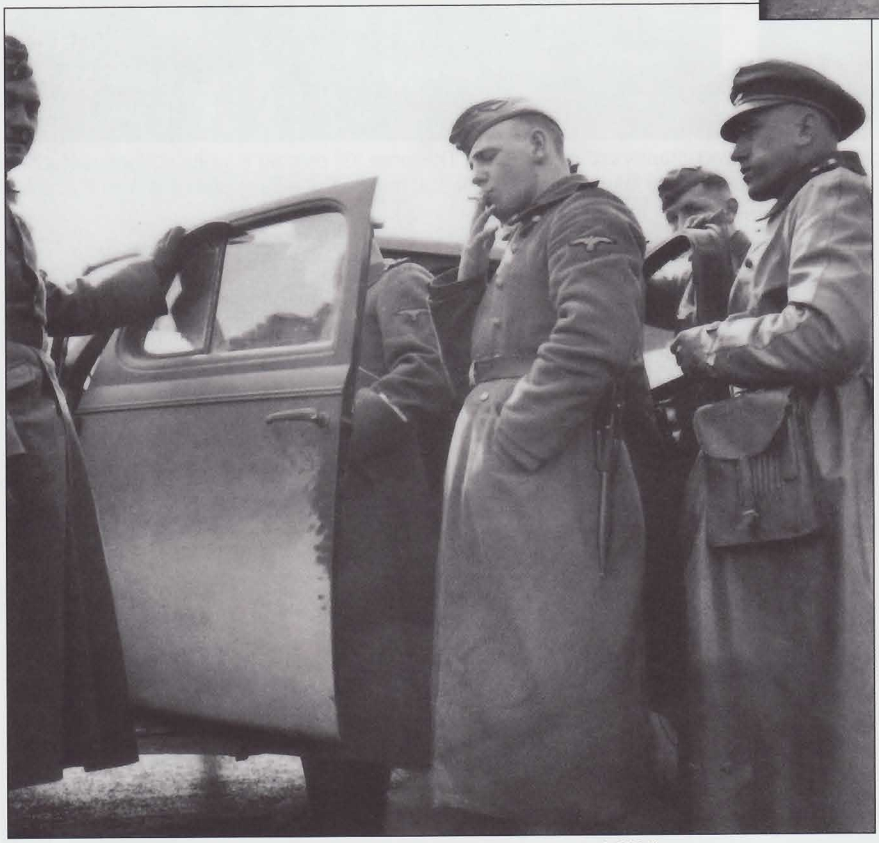
A column of staff vehicles leaving a parking area by a staff building somewhere in Russia. Note the width markings painted in white on the fenders of the vehicle. The car's registration plate is "SS 86072".



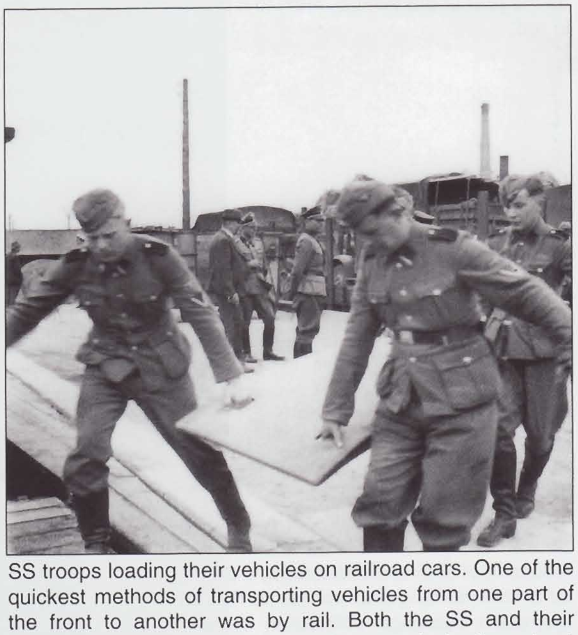
A long column of SS staff cars in Heeresgruppe Mitte struggling along a muddy road in Russia during the early spring of 1942. Note the second car from the left. This is a Chevrolet limousine that has been pressed into service by the German Army. It has been repainted in dark gray and is covered with mud. The car is equipped with an improvised Notek light installed on a guard in front of the radiator. Behind the Chevrolet, a standard medium personnel carrier follows.



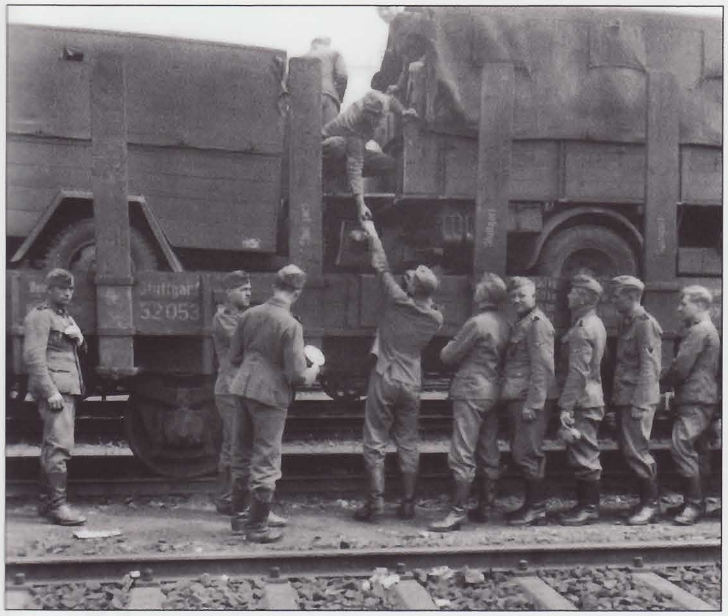
A fully loaded heavy 6-ton MAN or Büssing truck stacked with soldiers' belongings has halted on a railroad platform in preparation for transportation on a specially built railroad flatcar.



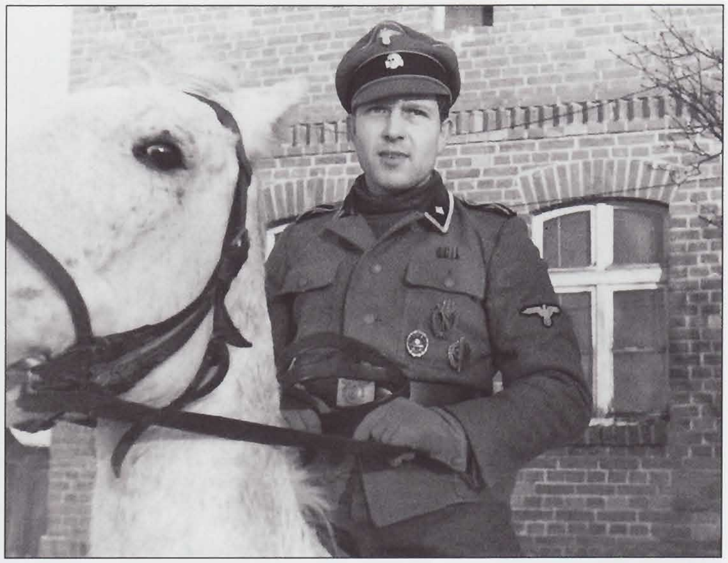
Close-up of a Chevrolet limousine staff car with SS officers and NCOs.



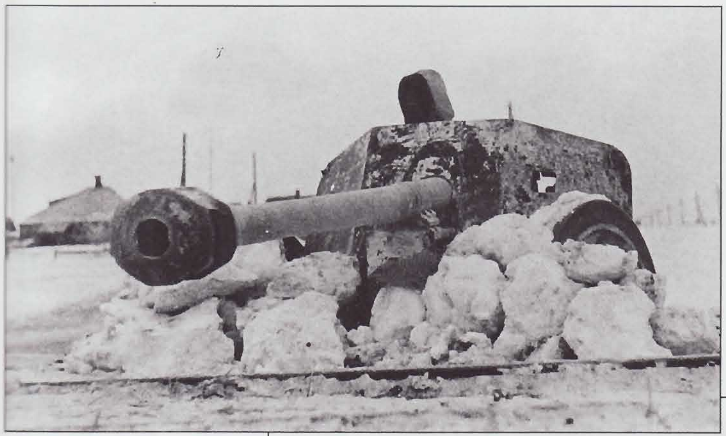
SS troops loading their vehicles on railroad cars. One of the quickest methods of transporting vehicles from one part of the front to another was by rail. Both the SS and their Wehrmacht counterparts used rail extensively throughout the war in Russia.



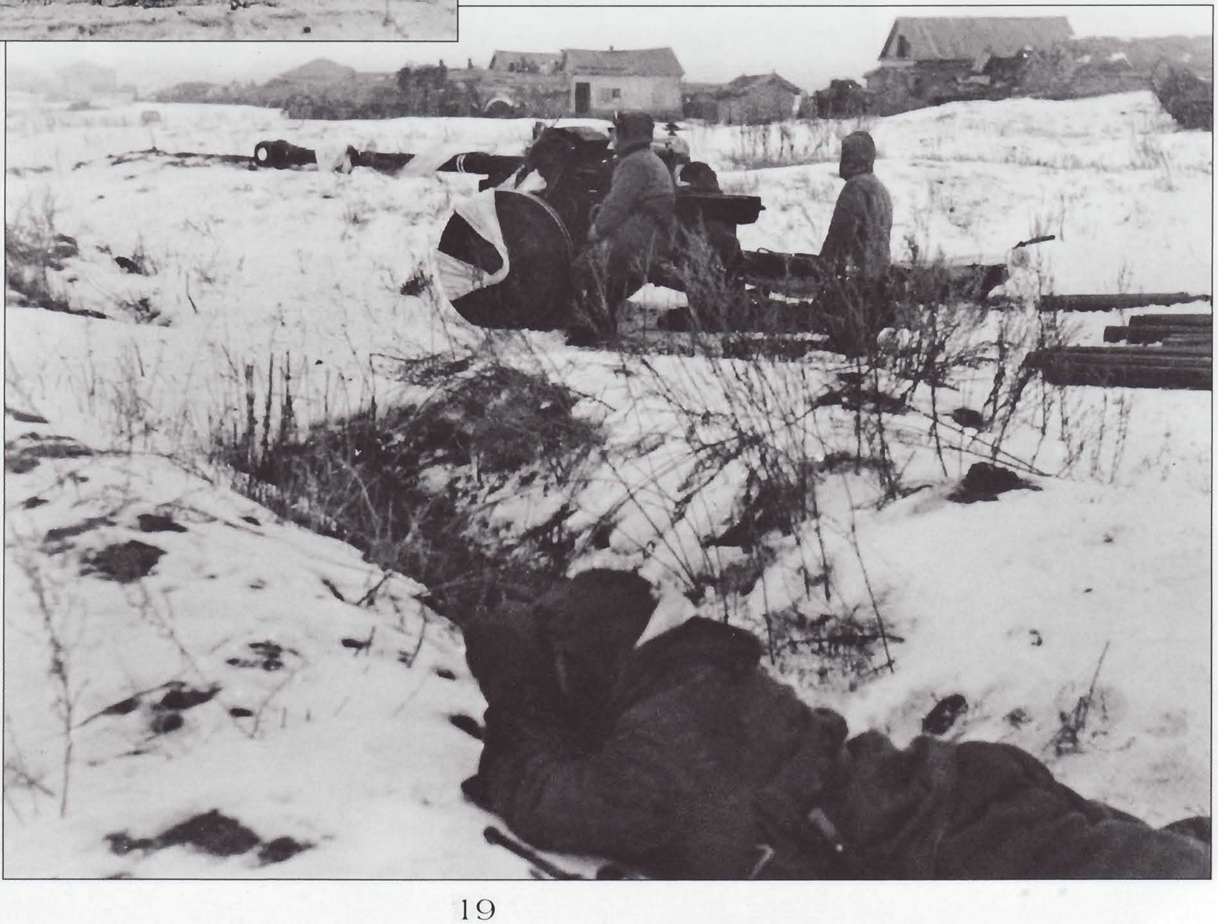
Dinner is served from an Opel Blitz truck aboard a flatbed railway car. This photograph was more than likely taken prior to disembarking to the frontline.



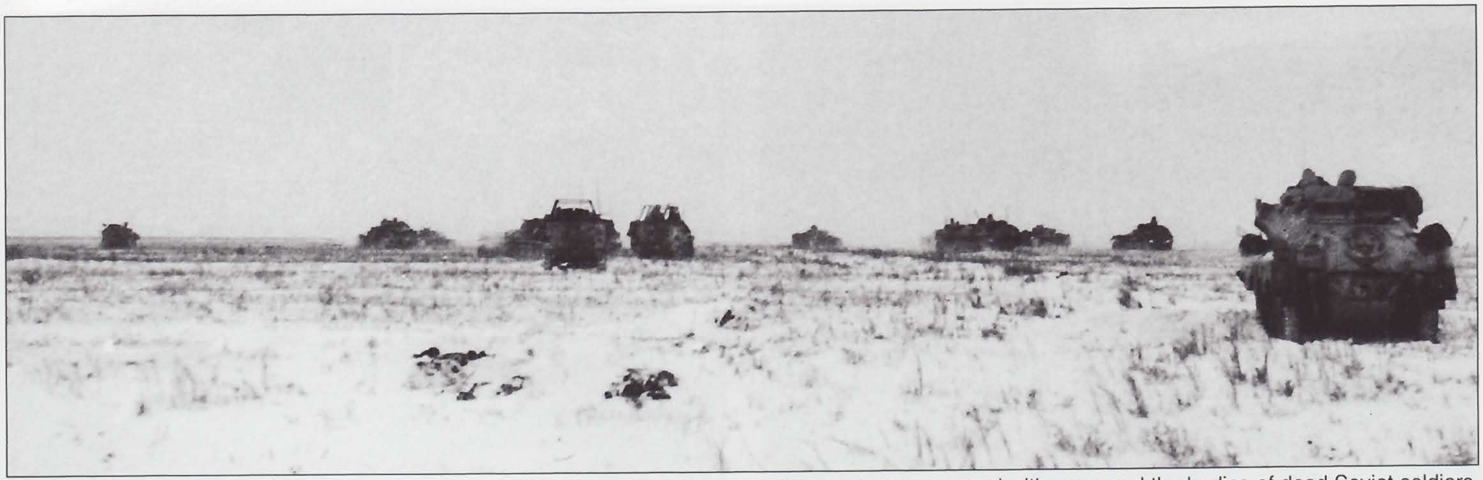
A well-decorated SS NCO on horseback after returning from the front in Russia. Pinned to his left tunic are a wound badge and a decoration for close-range combat. He is wearing parade gloves, and beneath his tunic he is wearing a civilian sweater. The NCO cap is the later field type.



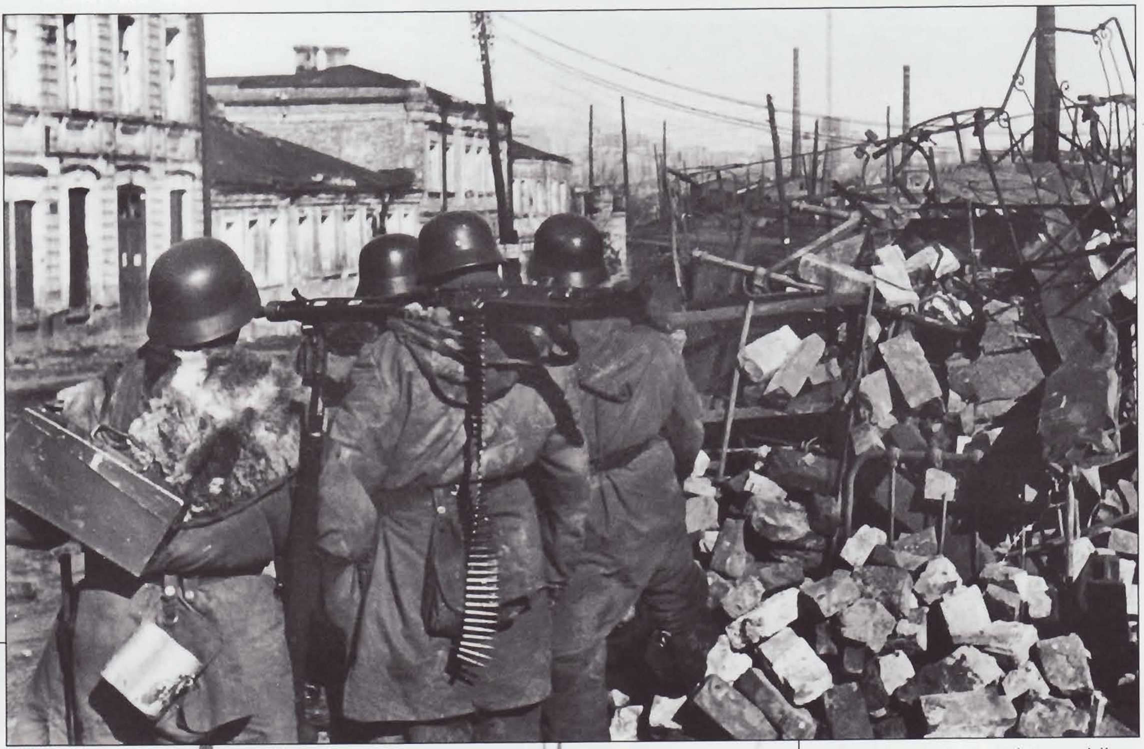
A 7.5cm PaK40 guarding a position on the outskirts of a Russian village. The gun has crudely received an application of winter whitewash paint. The gunner has improvised his dug-in position by trying to conceal the general outline of the gun's shape by placing chunks of snow over the lower front part of the gun piece.

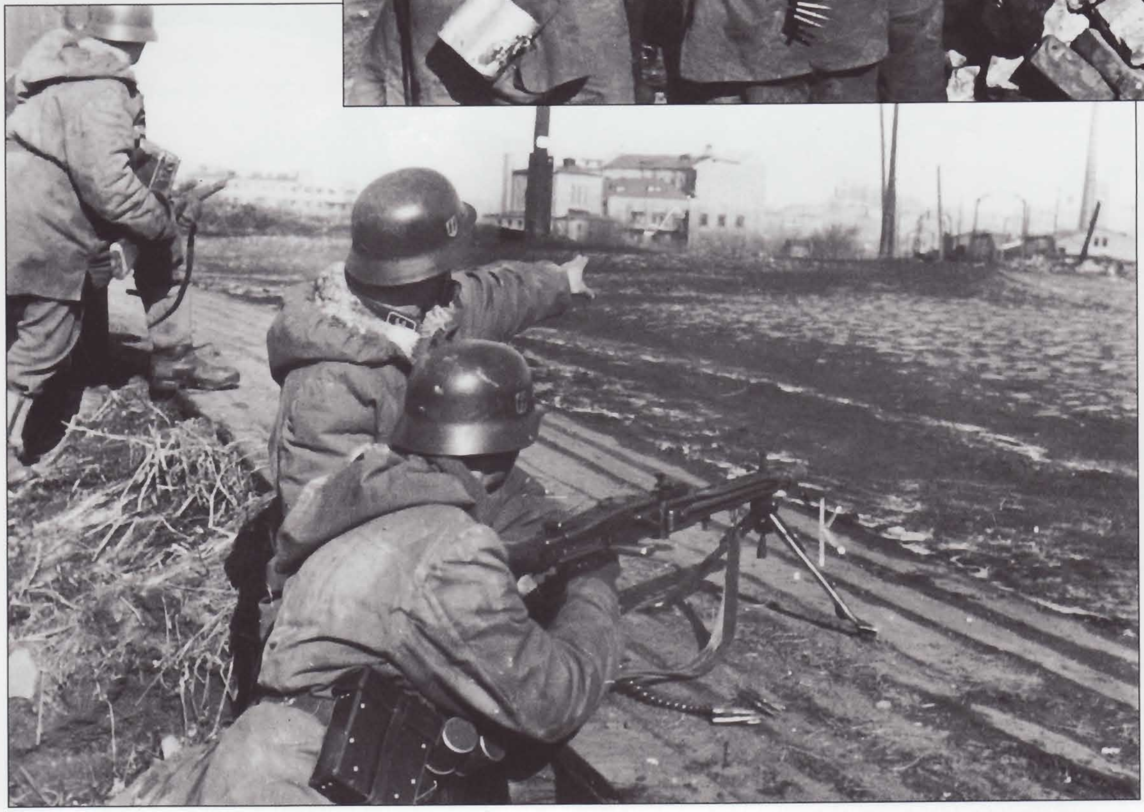


An SS defensive position inside a snow-covered village. A 7.5cm PaK40 gun crew is seen waiting for orders to fire. They all wear winter reversible uniforms with the gray side out. Unusually, the gun still retains its summer camouflage scheme and no attempt at camouflaging the weapon has been made except for white sheeting wrapped around the barrel and wheel. This piece is quite exposed.

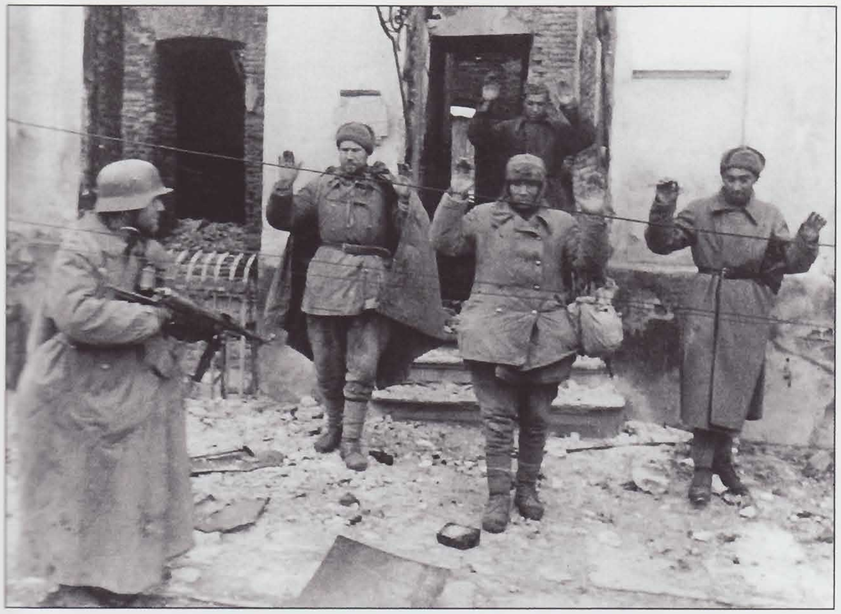


Panzergrenadiers being transported in a number of Sd.Kfz.251 halftracks across the vast steppe covered with snow and the bodies of dead Soviet soldiers. The halftrack with a frame antenna is a command vehicle.

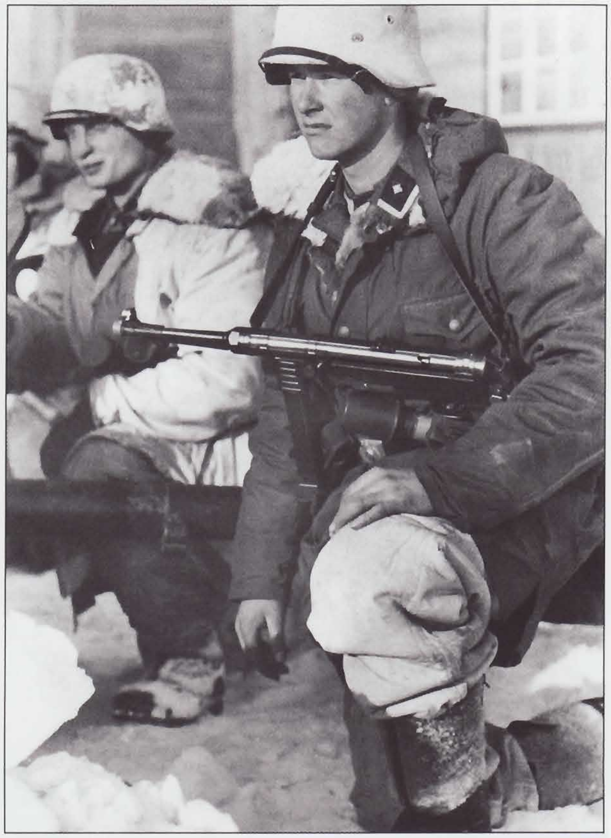




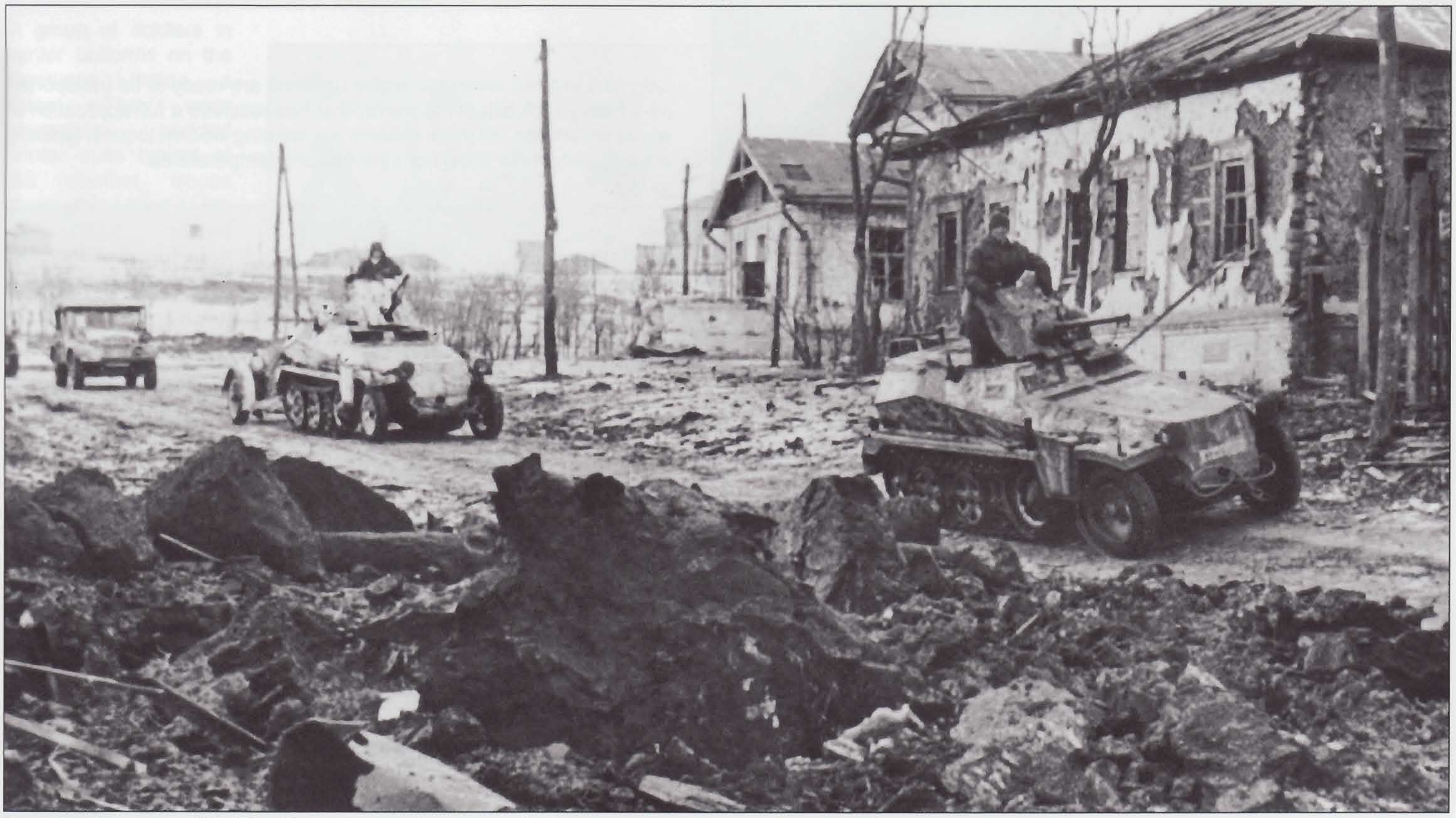
Two shots showing soldiers from the SS-Panzergrenadier-Division "Das Reich" entering Kharkov in March 1943. Light MG42 machine-gunners advance into the city wearing the famous SS parka jackets that were issued to troops just before they left France for Russia in January 1943. For these soldiers it was a savage battle for possession of the city. Constantly they encountered stubborn resistance.



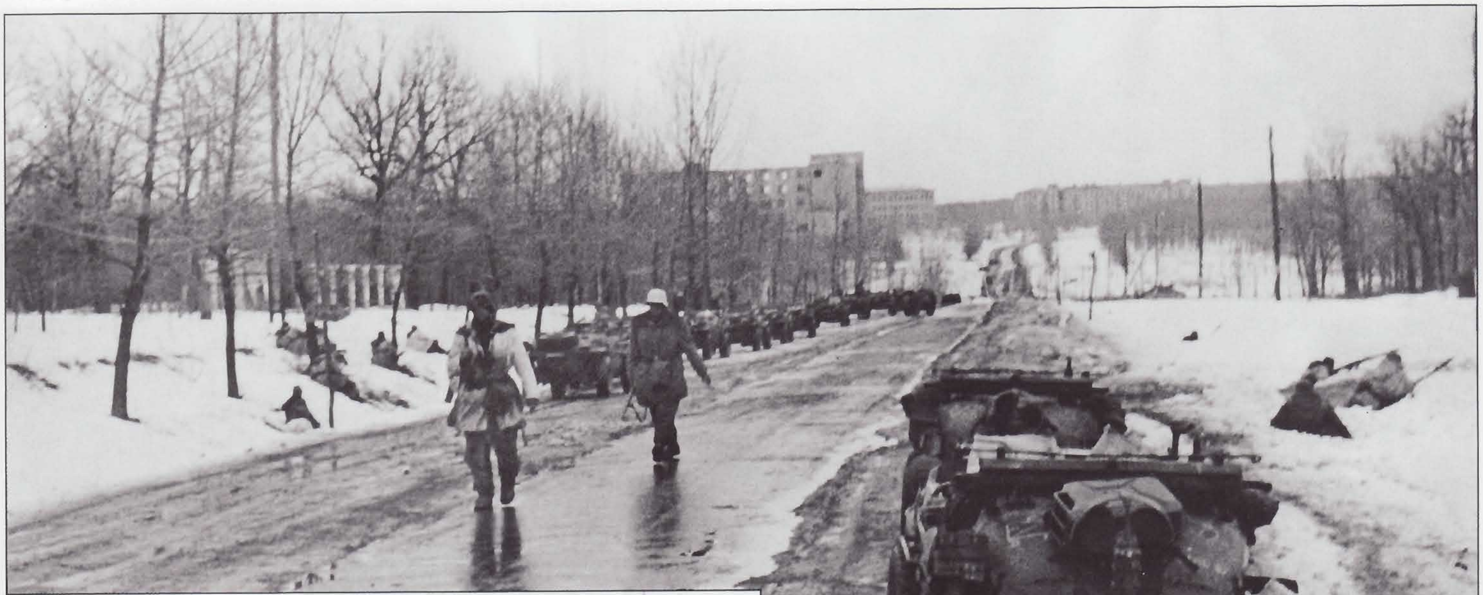
An SS soldier armed with an MP40 machine pistol escorts captured Russian troops from a demolished building during bitter fighting inside the city of Kharkov in March 1943. Although the Russians within Kharkov still had superiority in numbers and firepower, within a few days of the battle they had become disorganized, demoralized and worn down from continuous fighting.



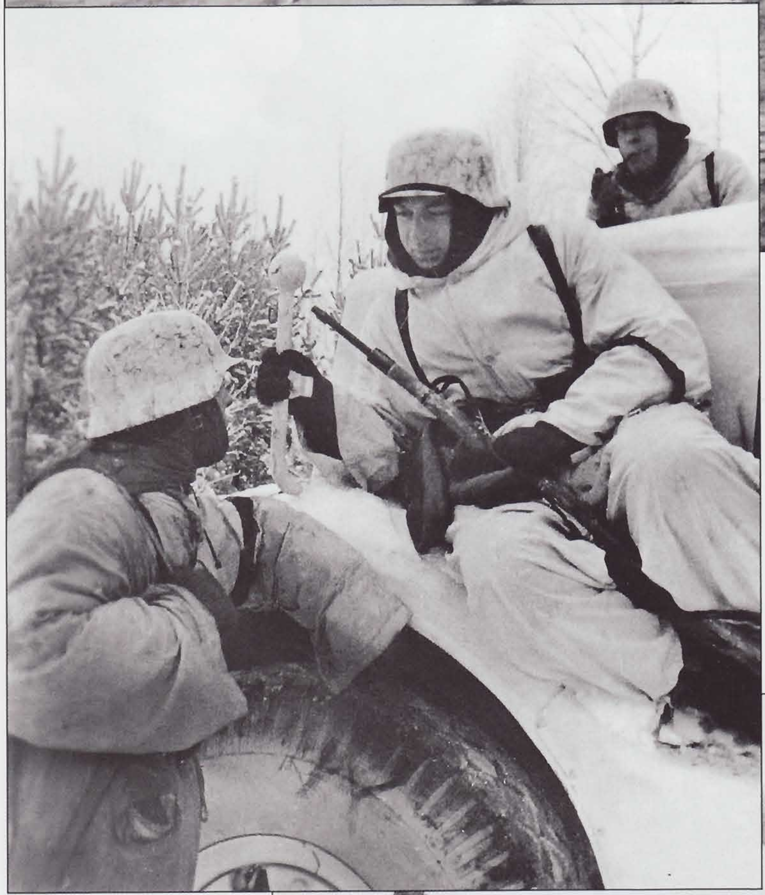
A famous photo of SS-Panzergrenadier soldiers in Kharkov fighting for the city. The Unterscharführer is armed with an MP40 machine pistol and his uniform is typical of this period - his formation battledress is composed of winter reversible trousers, a field-gray parka fur jacket and felt boots. He is wearing a shirt and sweater beneath his uniform. Next to the grenadier is a PaK gunner wearing the parka white side out.



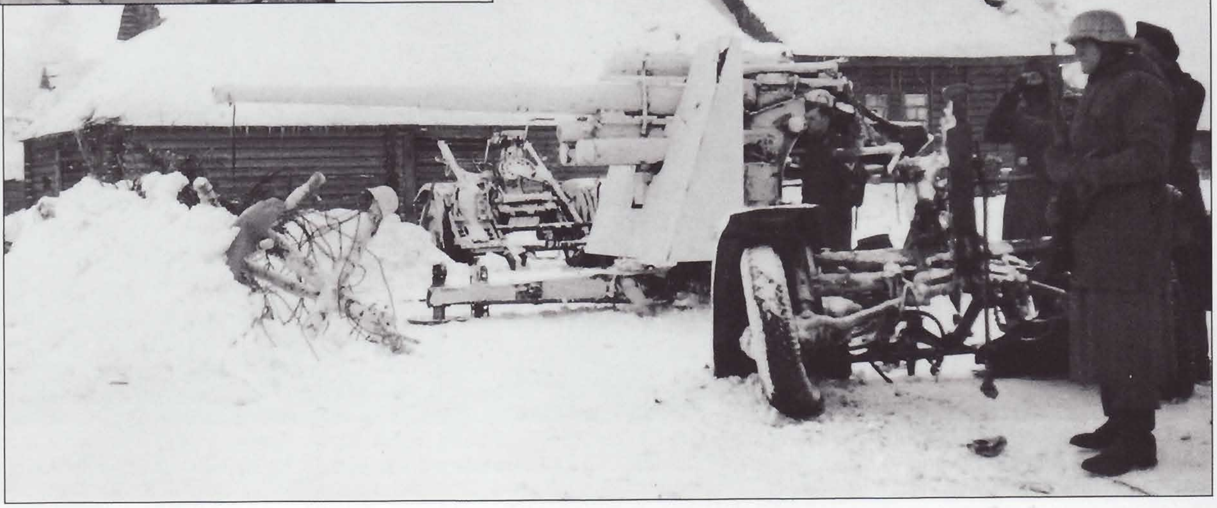
Crudely whitewashed Sd.Kfz.250/10 halftracks armed with 3.7cm PaK35/36 guns. These light armored vehicles are from a reconnaissance battalion of the "LAH" Division, and are advancing along a rubble-strewn street in Kharkov following its successful capture. "Das Reich" fought for Kharkov alongside the "LAH" and "Totenkopf" Divisions.



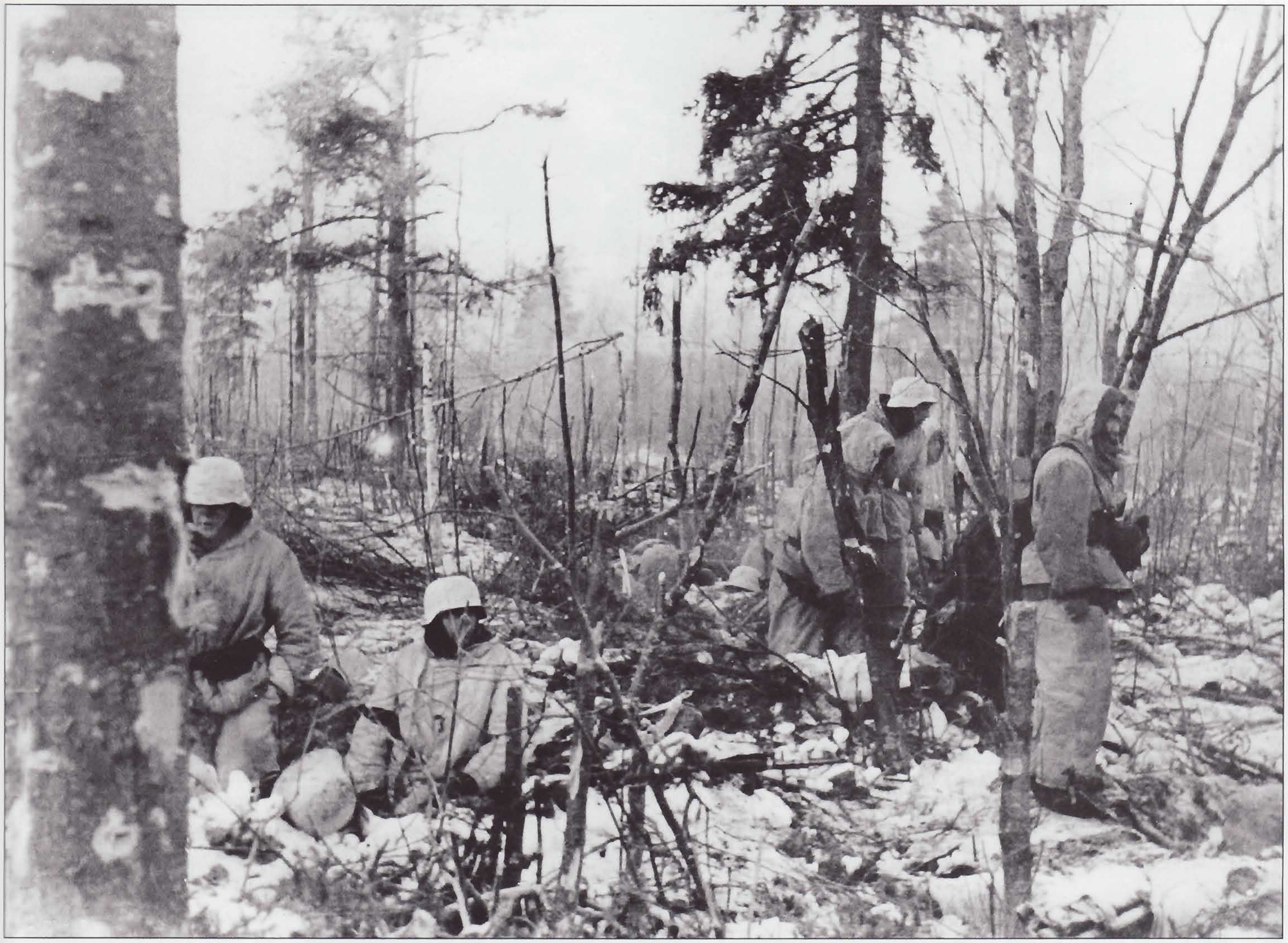
At least a dozen Schwimmwagen vehicles from a reconnaissance battalion of "LAH" in Kharkov. The vehicles still retain their standard gray paint and have not received an application of winter whitewash camouflage. On the rear, the vehicles carry a full set of markings including a tactical sign for a motorized reconnaissance unit, and a divisional emblem painted on the right.



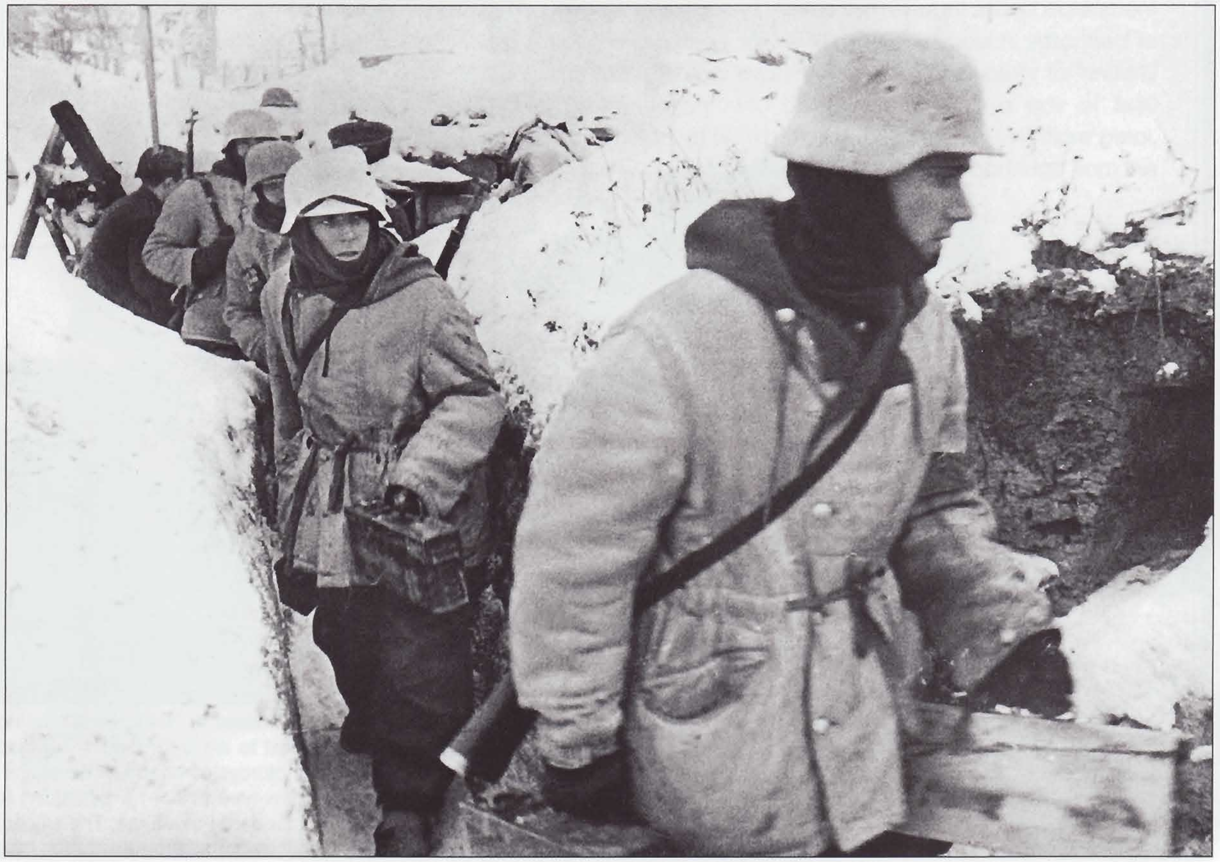
Germans in fresh reversible winter uniforms are ready to be transported on a heavy halftrack prime mover that has received a full application of winter whitewash. All three soldiers are wearing woolen toques, typically worn to protect the head from the freezing temperatures.



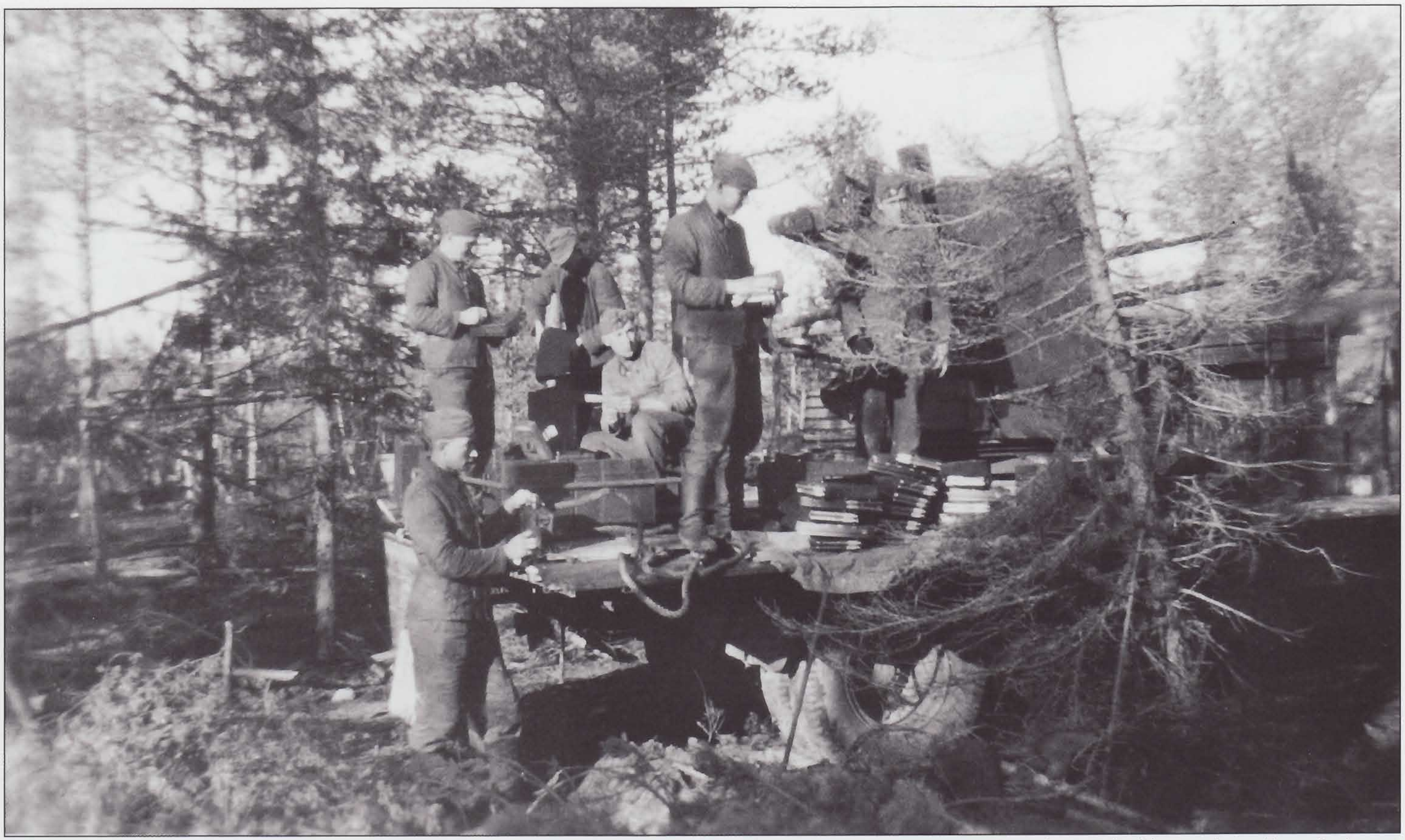
When properly emplaced and fully camouflaged, even a weapon as large as an 8.8cm flak gun could be difficult to spot. Here in this photograph a whitewashed 8.8cm FlaK36/37 gun is positioned by a building during a lull in the fighting. One of the gun's limber wheels appears to be damaged.



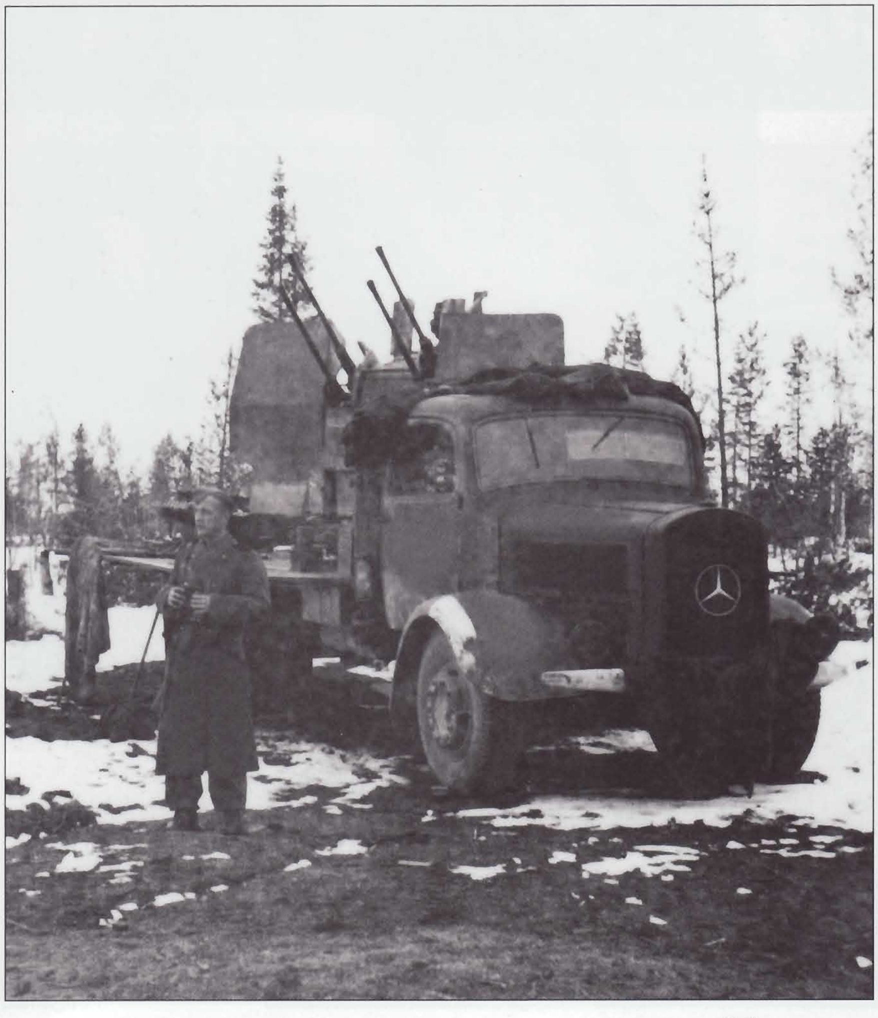
A group of soldiers in winter uniforms on the frontlines inside a forest. They wear reversible padded winter suits typical of SS combat troops during this period of the war. The colored armbands being worn by the troops can be clearly seen.



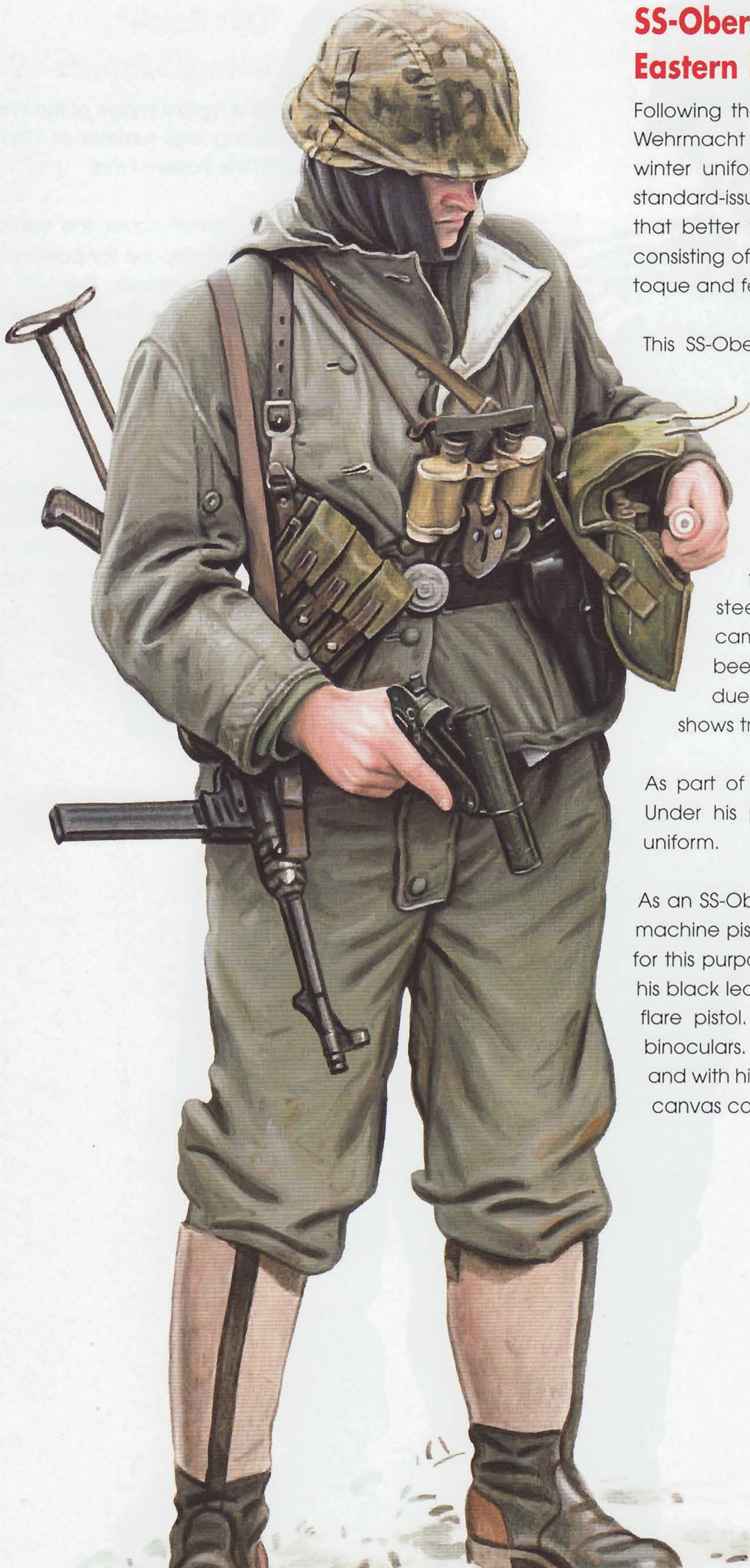
Assault troops move along a trench. They all wear two-piece reversible camouflage suits, and carry ammunition boxes for their Kar98k rifles. The soldiers' colored armbands can just be seen on their left arms. The colors of the bands would be changed on a daily basis, as would the arm on which they were worn.



Two photographs of a 2cm FlaK38 Flakvierling mounted on a Mercedes-Benz L3000 truck. Note the registration plate and white road markings that were used until 1943. This particular flak gun was normally served by an eight-man crew. These quadruple weapons were much respected by low-level enemy pilots and were devastating against light vehicles, as well as troops caught in the open. (MK photo)



Members of "Das Reich" during a break in a march stand next to a 1.5-ton staff truck displaying the tactical sign of a motorcycle battalion. The troops wear a collection of old- and new-type uniforms consisting of field-gray overcoats and standard Feldmütze. The officer is wearing a new-type parka jacket and felt boots.



SS-Obersturmführer, "Das Reich", Eastern Front, Winter 1942-43

Following the first terrible winter of 1941-42 in Russia, the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS received a more practical winter uniform developed due to the inadequacies of standard-issue winter clothing. It was in the autumn of 1942 that better winter clothing was provided for troops, this consisting of the hooded jacket, trousers, mittens, hooded toque and felt winter boots.

This SS-Obersturmführer operating on the Eastern Front during the winter of 1942-43 offers a typical image of a Waffen-SS soldier during this cold period of the war. He wears a reversible winter suit with the gray side outermost. He has his jacket open slightly, exposing part of the reversible white side. He is also wearing a toque to protect his neck, face and head from the extremely cold conditions. His M42 steel helmet cover still retains a summer camouflage scheme and no attempt has yet been made to alter its appearance, probably due to the fact there is no snow and the terrain still shows traces of greenery.

As part of his winter gear he wears felt leather boots. Under his padded uniform is the standard-issue wool uniform.

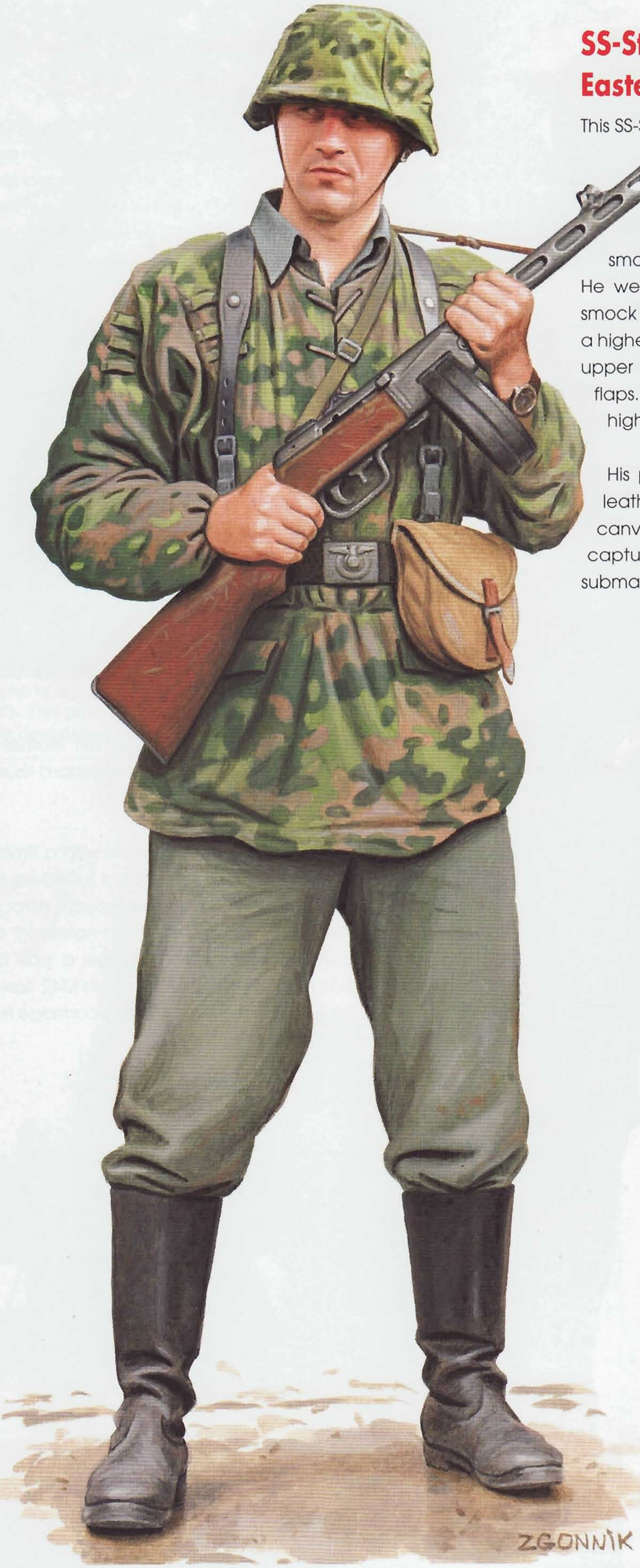
As an SS-Obersturmführer, he is armed with a 9mm MP40 machine pistol and carries the relevant issued equipment for this purpose - MP38/40 magazine pouch. Attached to his black leather infantryman's belt is a holster for an M42 flare pistol. Around his neck he wears a pair of 3x30 binoculars. In his right hand he holds an M42 flare pistol, and with his left hand he is removing a cartridge from the canvas case in order to fire it.

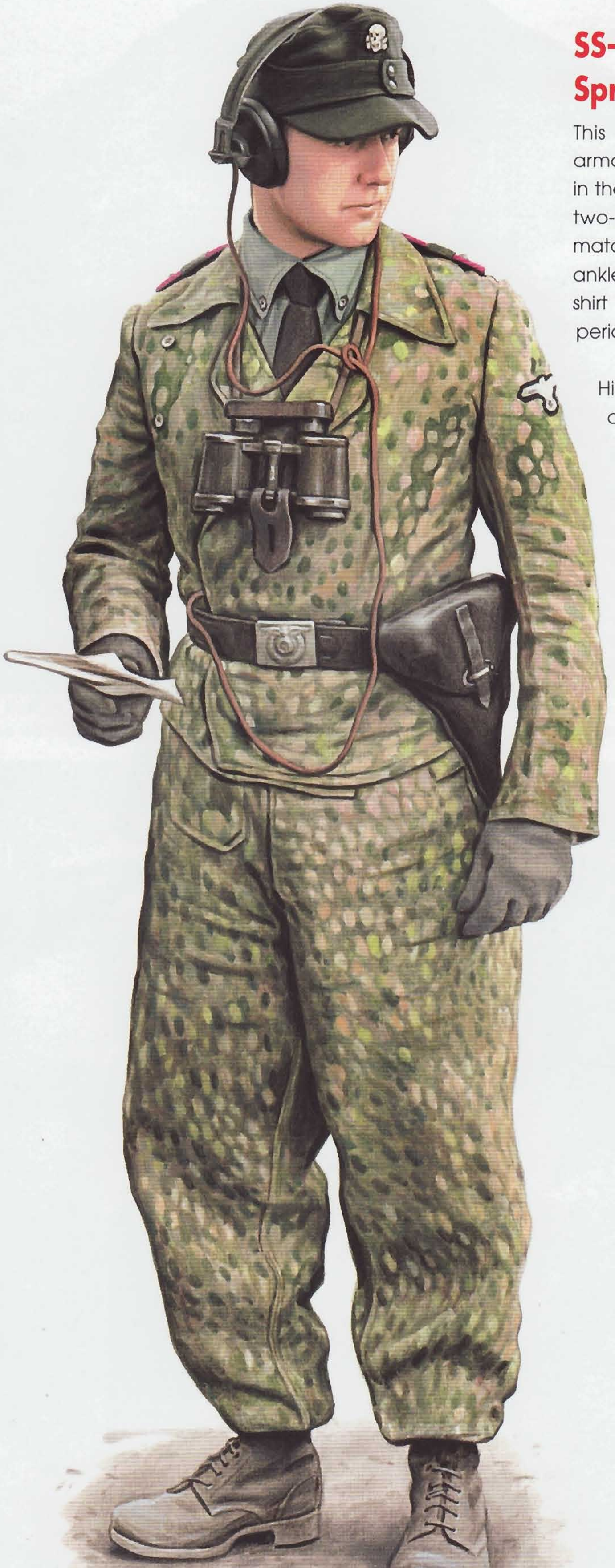
SS-Sturmann, "Das Reich", Eastern Front, Spring/Summer 1943

This SS-Sturmann presents a typical image of the Waffen-SS during the spring and summer of 1943, whilst operating on the Eastern Front.

Like the distinctive helmet cover, the camouflage smock was now common apparel for combat troops. He wears an M42 camouflage smock. This M42 type of smock differed from the early types in many ways, having a higher elasticated waistband, sets of foliage loops on the upper arms and body, and skirt pockets with buttoned flaps. His trousers are field-gray and are tucked into his high-topped leather marching boots.

His personal equipment consists of the enlisted man's leather belt, M1939 leather infantry support straps, and a canvas bag containing 7.62x25mm ammunition for his captured Soviet PPSh-41 (Pistolet-Pulemyot Shpagina) submachine gun.





SS-Oberscharführer, "Das Reich", Spring/Summer 1944

This Panzer commander belongs to an unidentified armored unit in the "Das Reich" Division during operations in the spring or summer of 1944. He is wearing a distinctive two-piece M1944 dot-pattern camouflage tunic with matching trousers tucked into a pair of standard lace-up ankle boots. Beneath his tunic he is wearing a dark gray shirt and tie, which was common for officers during this period of the war.

His Panzer enlisted man's/NCO's M1943 black wool field cap was issued to tank crews. This headgear was standard after 1943, and became almost universal as heavy casualties were replaced by men who received it as original issue. Over his M1943 panzer cap he is wearing an older pair of Dfh.b (Doppel-Ferhohrer Model B) headphones. These have a leather-covered sprung-metal headband, adjustable earpieces for comfort, and large rubber ear-pads that served as both padding and to block out unwanted noise.

Attached to his black leather infantryman's belt is his 9mm P38 hard-shell leather holster. Around his neck he wears a pair of 3x30 binoculars.

SS-Untersturmführer, "Das Reich", Eastern Front, Summer 1944

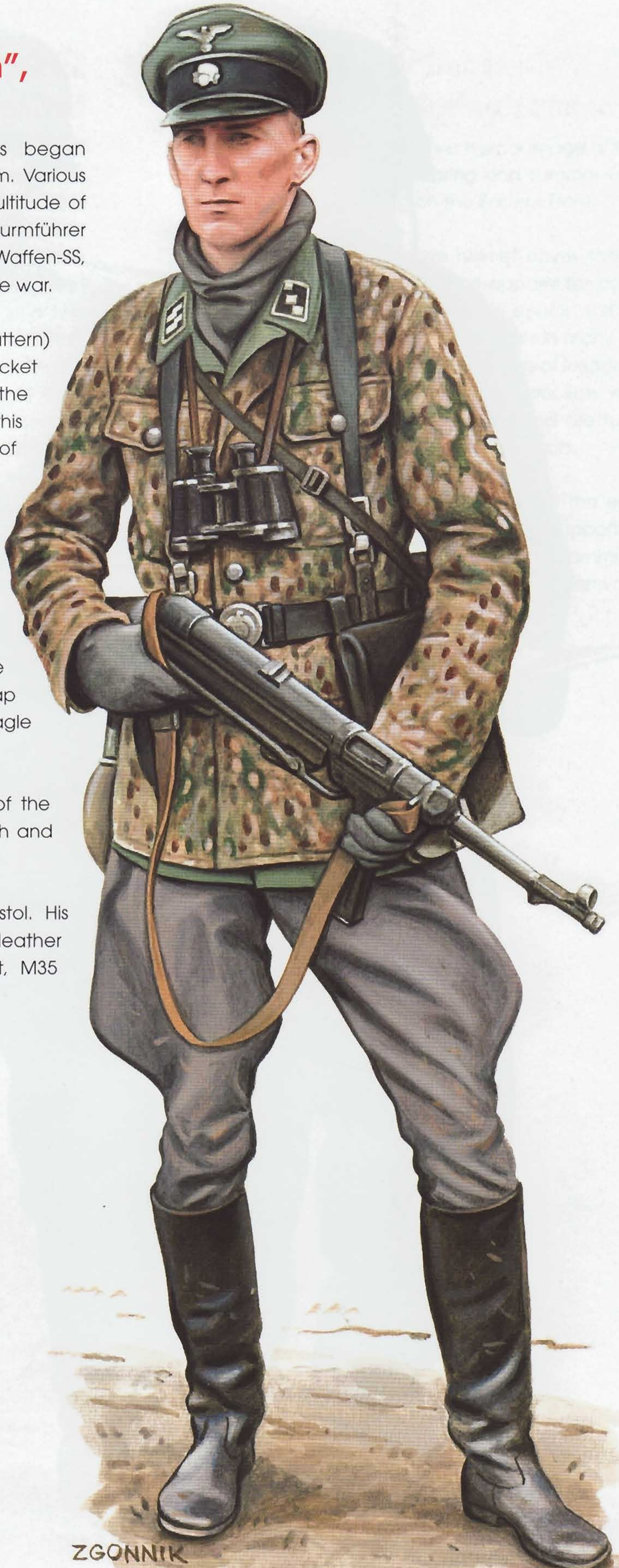
By the summer of 1944, Waffen-SS troops began demonstrating a diverse appearance in uniform. Various types of SS uniforms were worn that gave a multitude of looks to the individual soldier. This SS-Untersturmführer typifies one of the many diverse uniforms of the Waffen-SS, notably "Das Reich", during the late period of the war.

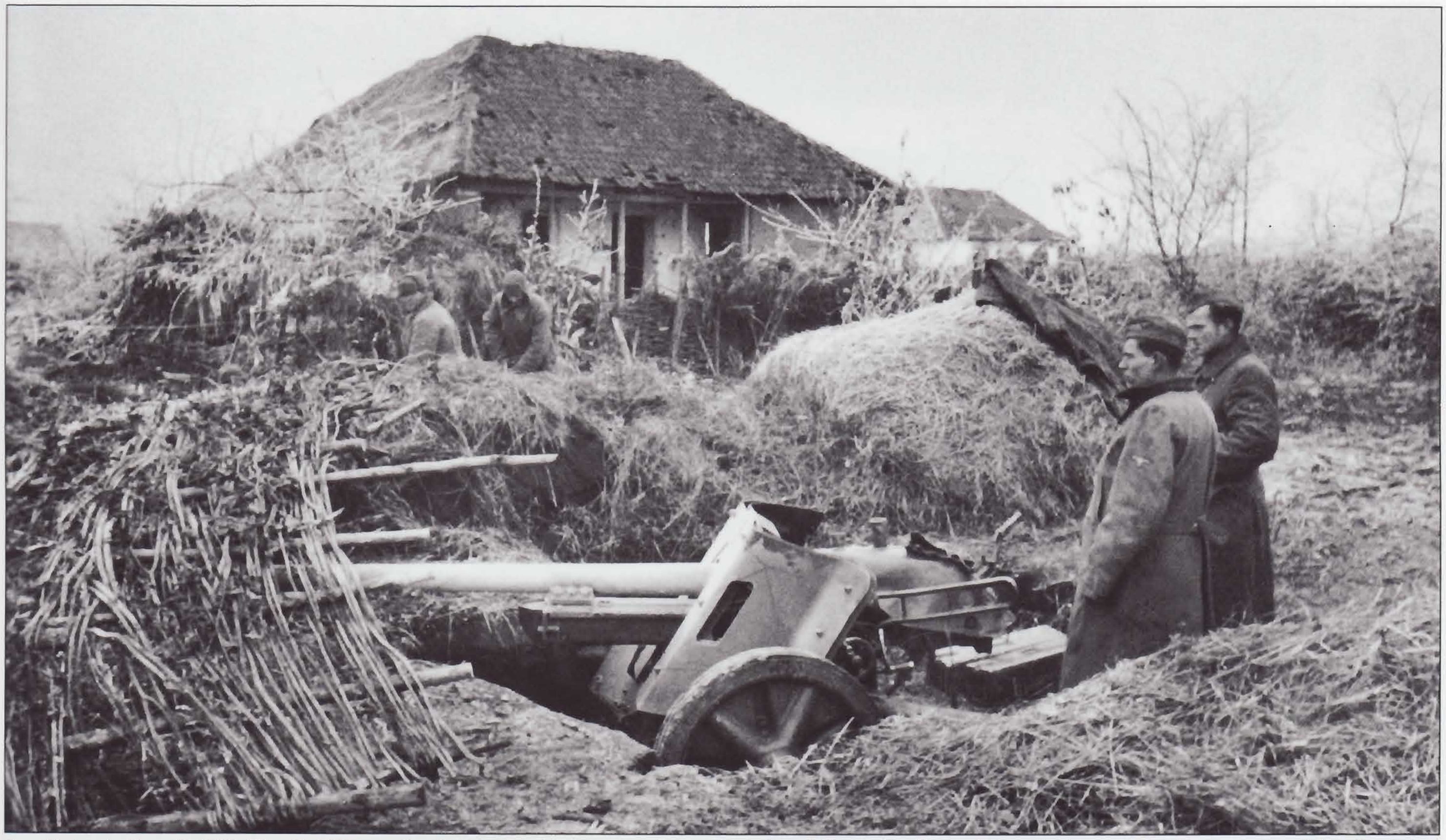
Over his field blouse he wears the M44 (dot-pattern) camouflage drill jacket. The camouflage drill jacket was manufactured as a replacement for the camouflage smock late in the war. Normally this M44 camouflage drill jacket came with a pair of (dot-pattern) camouflage drill trousers. However, this officer has not been issued with them and instead he wears a standard pair of gray officer service trousers tucked into a pair of officer boots.

His headgear, an M1938 field cap, indicates he is an officer. It is manufactured in the original style with a peak covered in cloth as the crown. His cap has white piping and displays the national eagle motif and death's head badge.

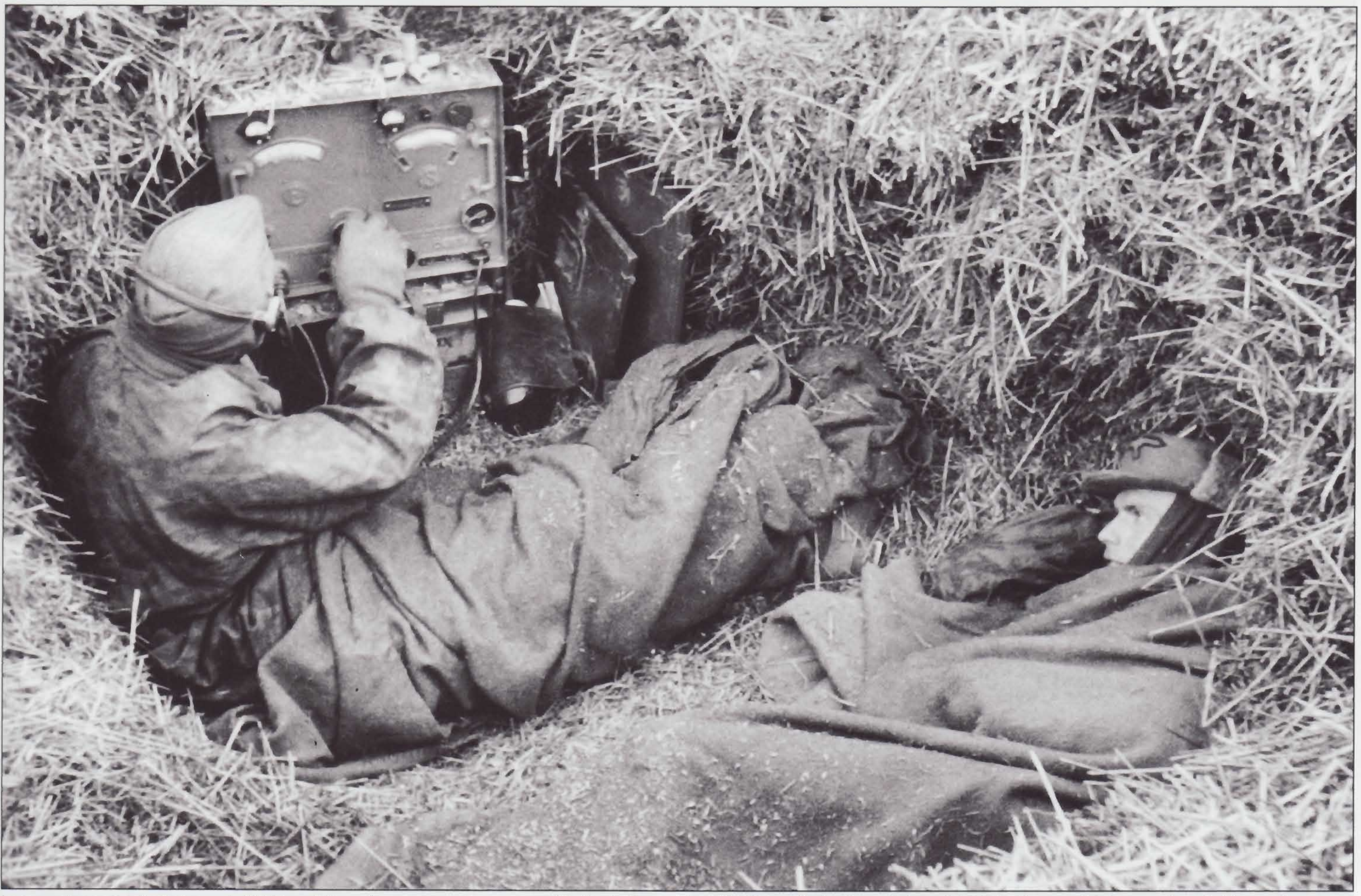
His woolen field-gray service uniform consists of the M42 SS field blouse with an SS rune collar patch and rank collar insignia.

He is armed with a 9mm MP40 machine pistol. His personal equipment consists of the M1939 leather infantry support straps, SS enlisted man's belt, M35 report/map case, and a pair of 6x30 binoculars.

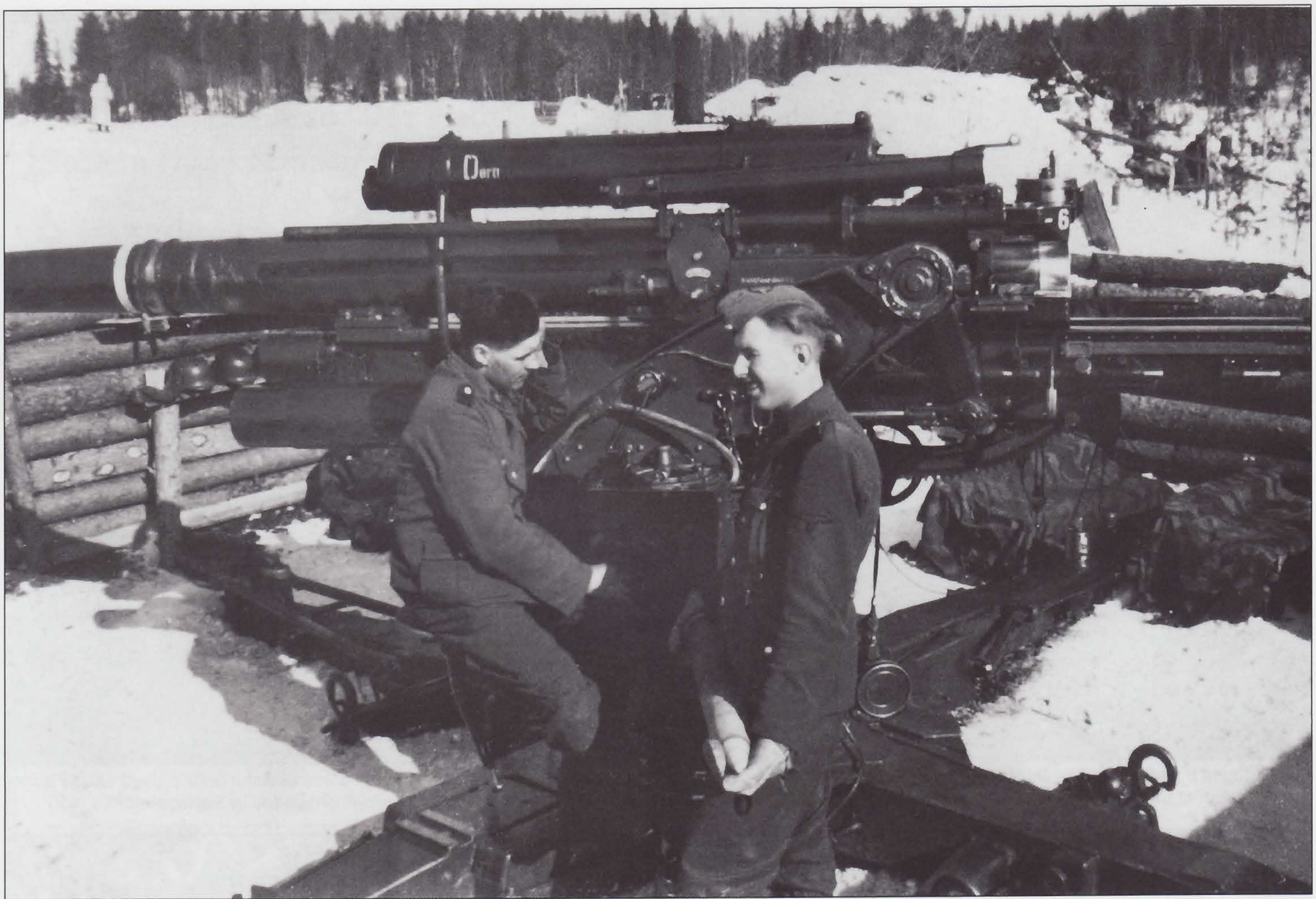




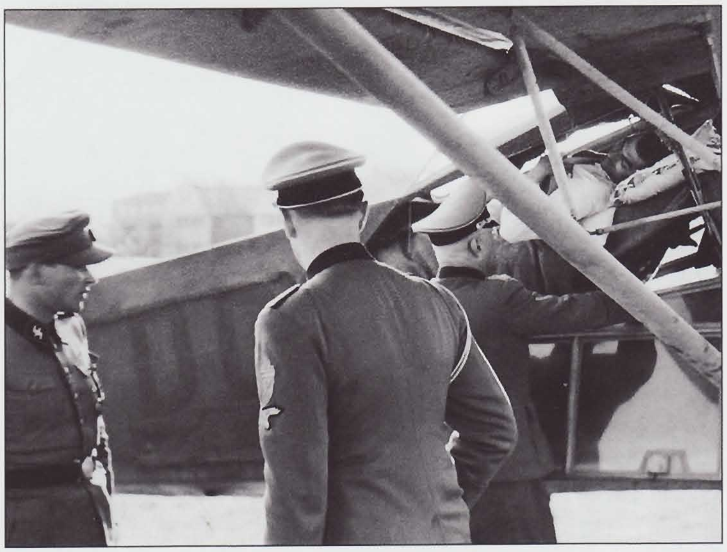
A well-dug-in 5cm PaK38. The PaK38 was the first antitank weapon to be produced as full-sized artillery. Although these antitank guns proved deadly during the early part of the war, German gunners soon realized they required something more potent to counter the growing menace of Soviet armor.



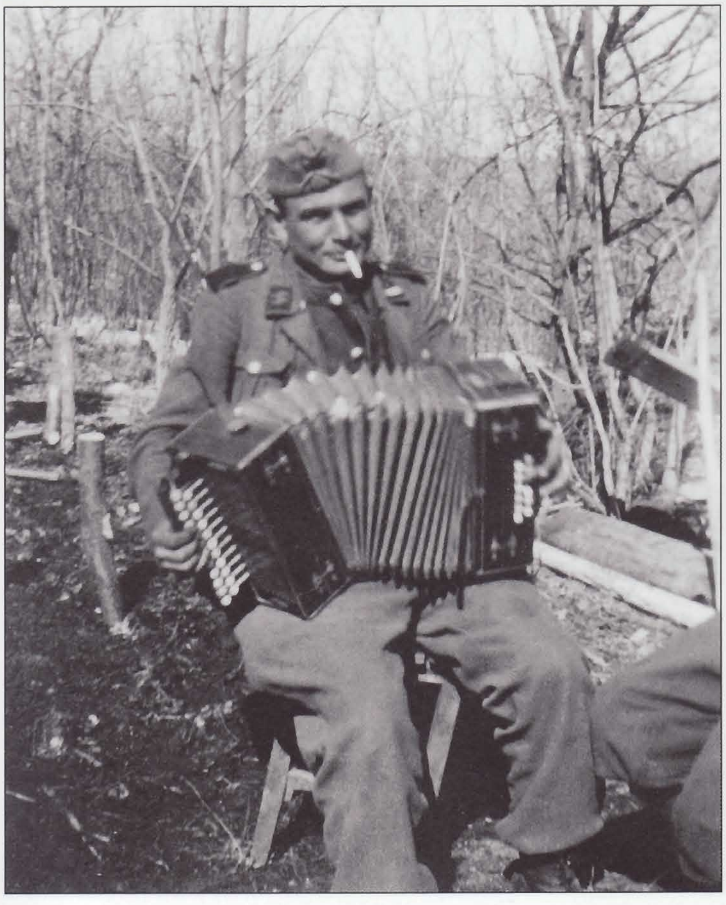
In a well-concealed dugout, Waffen-SS radiomen can be seen with their Torn. Fu. B1 S/E radio in the winter of 1943. These widely used portable radios were carried by a soldier on a specially designed backpack frame, and when connected to each other (upper and lower valves) via special cables, they could be used on the march.



SS troops with their 8.8cm gun wait for orders to fire. The gun has been positioned in a parapet, which was quite common, especially in a defensive position where the flak crew remained for some considerable time. (MK photo)



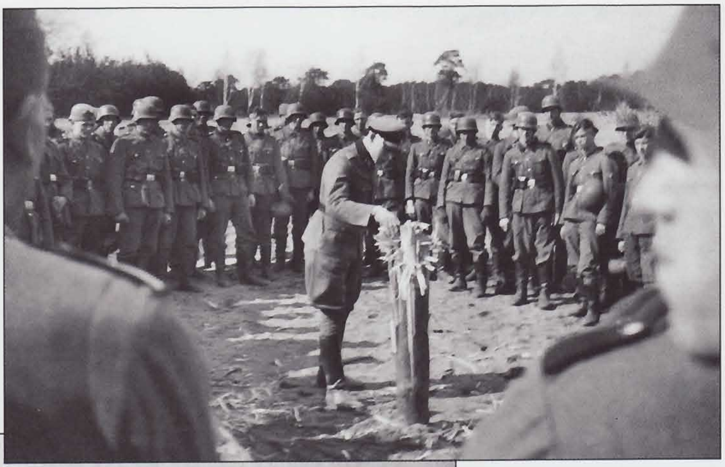
SS officers can be seen standing next to a Fieseler Fi156 Storch that displays a German civilian registration number. A wounded passenger is being secured in the aircraft's fuselage on a stretcher.



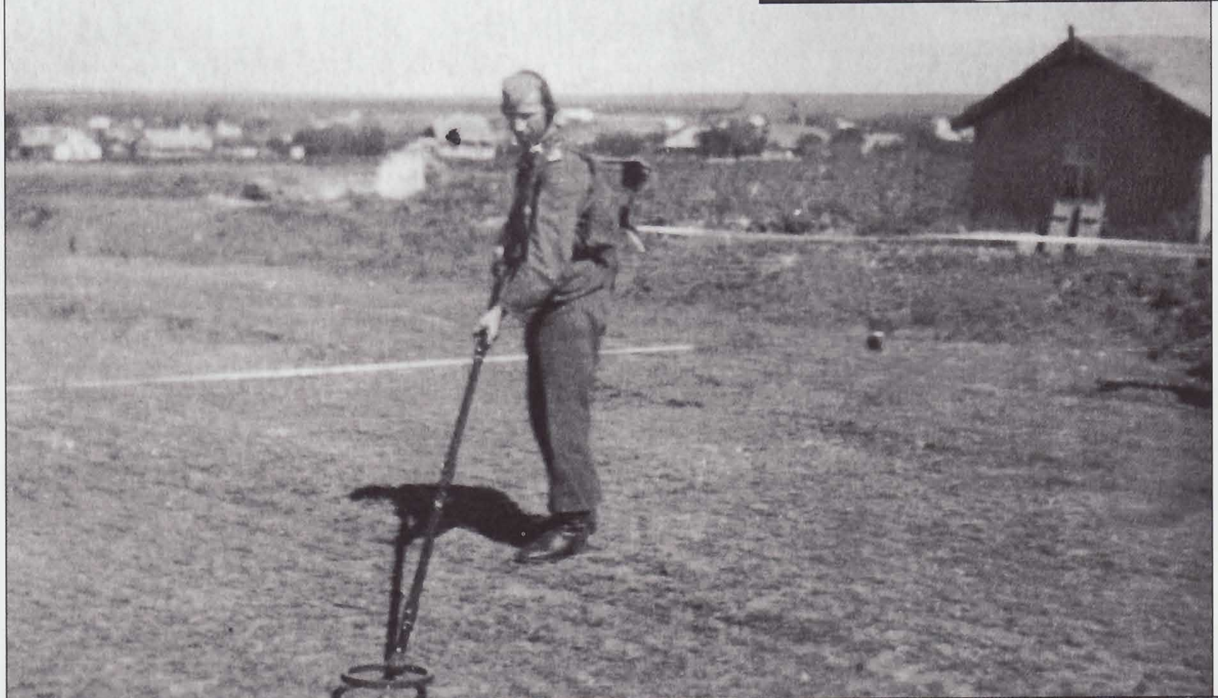
A soldier in a relaxing atmosphere plays the accordion during a pause in the fighting in the early spring of 1943. He is wearing the standard SS Feldgrau blouse over a non-regulation German military blouse. Note the low-visibility SS patches made of Feldgrau collar runes, which are different from normal-issue white rank patches.

SS officers tuck into their rations during a break in their march. This photograph was probably taken in the early spring of 1943 when the "Das Reich" Division underwent further reorganization and re-supply to adjust for the losses suffered during the fight for Kharkov.

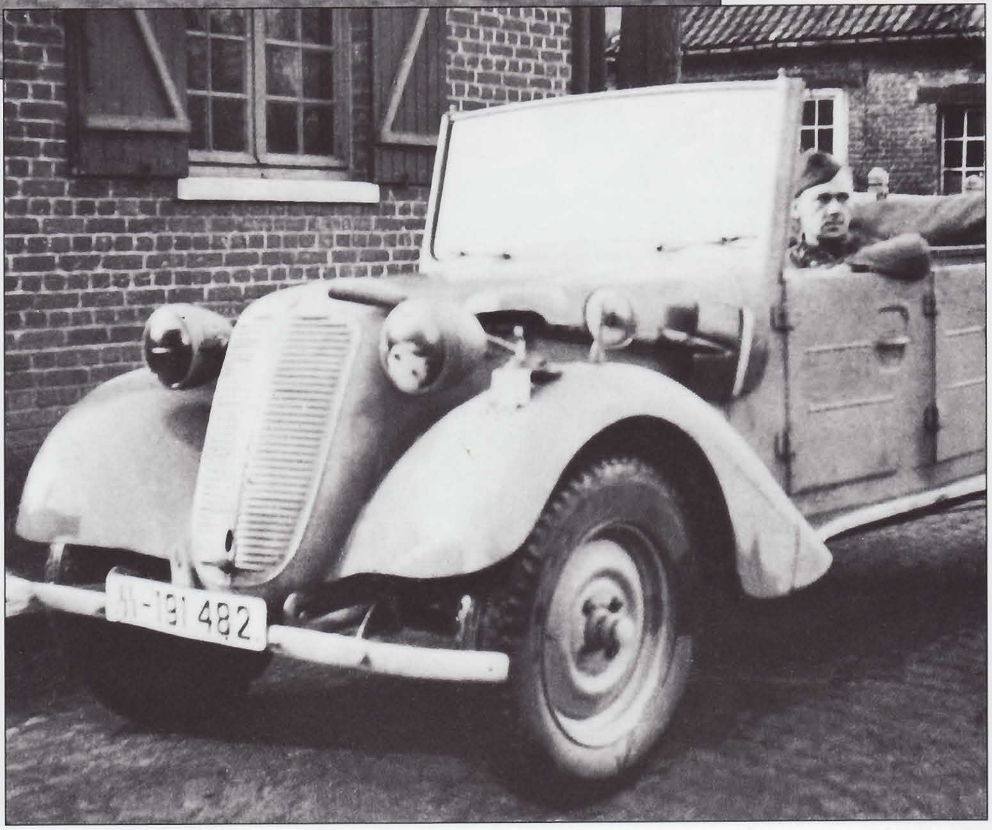
Three photographs showing newly formed SS squads prior to operations in the early summer of 1943. A number of troop leaders can be seen armed with MP40 machine pistols. Just prior to Kursk, SS divisions covered a sector that was twelve miles wide. "Das Reich" held the right flank, "Totenkopf" the left flank, whilst "LAH" was in the center.



An SS officer trains new conscripts near the frontline prior to the Kursk offensive. The SS man is more than likely explaining to young recruits the dangerous effects of splinter fragments from trees. (MK photo)



The rarest type of SS combat troops was the pioneer detachments that were given the task of mine-clearing. Here in this photograph, a soldier is using a mine detector to ensure the area is clear of mines to allow movement of forces to their allocated jump-off points for the Kursk offensive. (MK photo)



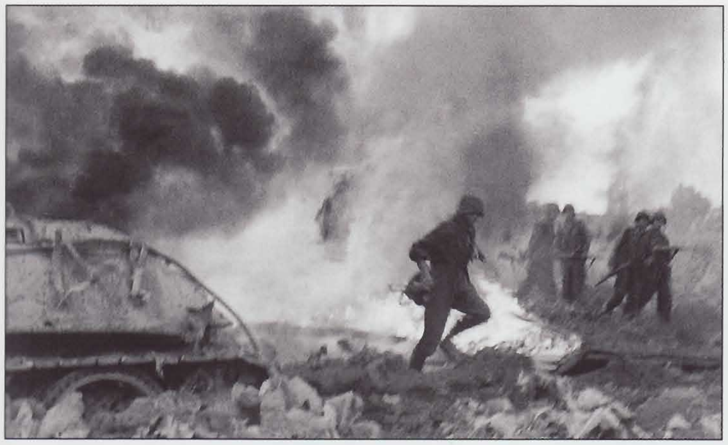
One of the rarest SS vehicles to be seen on the Eastern front was the Tatra Model 57K. It was produced in the Czech Protectorate primarily for Waffen-SS and police units, and 6000 of these vehicles rolled off the assembly lines for operations on the Eastern Front. (MK photo)

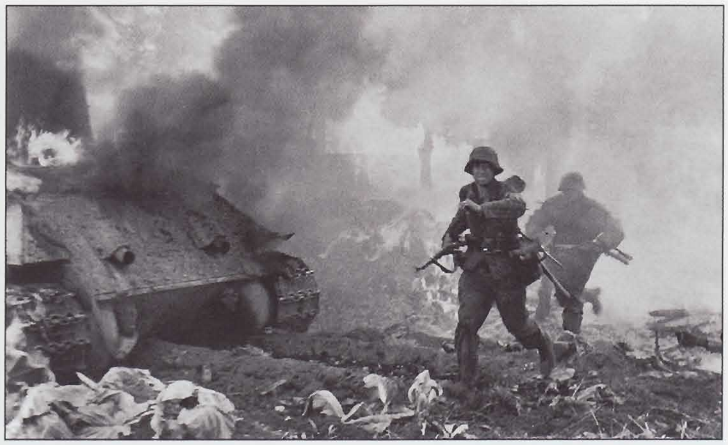
Operation Zitadelle is unleashed and two photographs show an armored battle group (Kampfgruppe) of the Waffen-SS advancing across a field. A variety of vehicles, including self-propelled guns and infantry carriers, light Sd.Kfz.250s and heavy Sd.Kfz.251s, sweeps across the vast open terrain. By the afternoon of the first day of the attack, "Das Reich" had achieved all its objectives.

SS soldiers march forward at Kursk with ammunition and full equipment. Although the division made considerable progress, its troops could not dislodge Soviet forces occupying defenses because poor conditions and minefields prevented SS tank and self-propelled artillery units from reaching the area and providing coverage for the grenadiers.

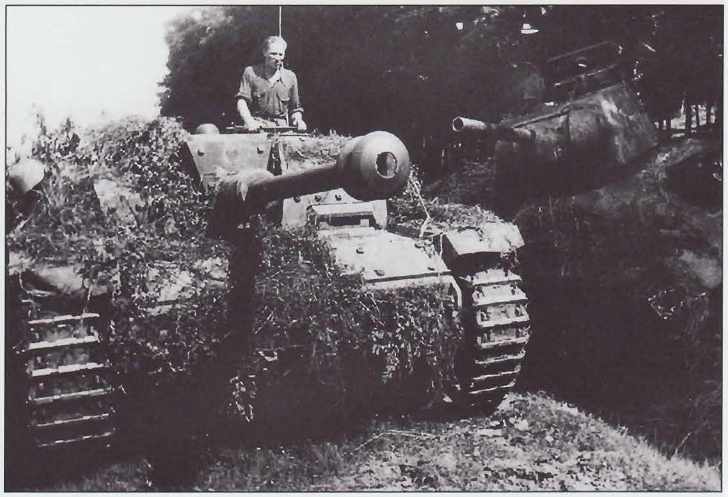
Here a battery of 15cm Nb41 weapons are fired in succession against Soviet targets during Kursk. Because of the back-blast, these deadly weapons were fired remotely by the crew using an electrical detonator attached to a cable that ran to the piece.

Supported by Tiger tanks, SS soldiers push forward to accomplish their next objective. A troop leader can be seen raising his arm to spur his men quickly forward. By 8 July, the focus of the battle had shifted to the southern sector of the front. "Das Reich" had fought courageously in spite of heavy losses.

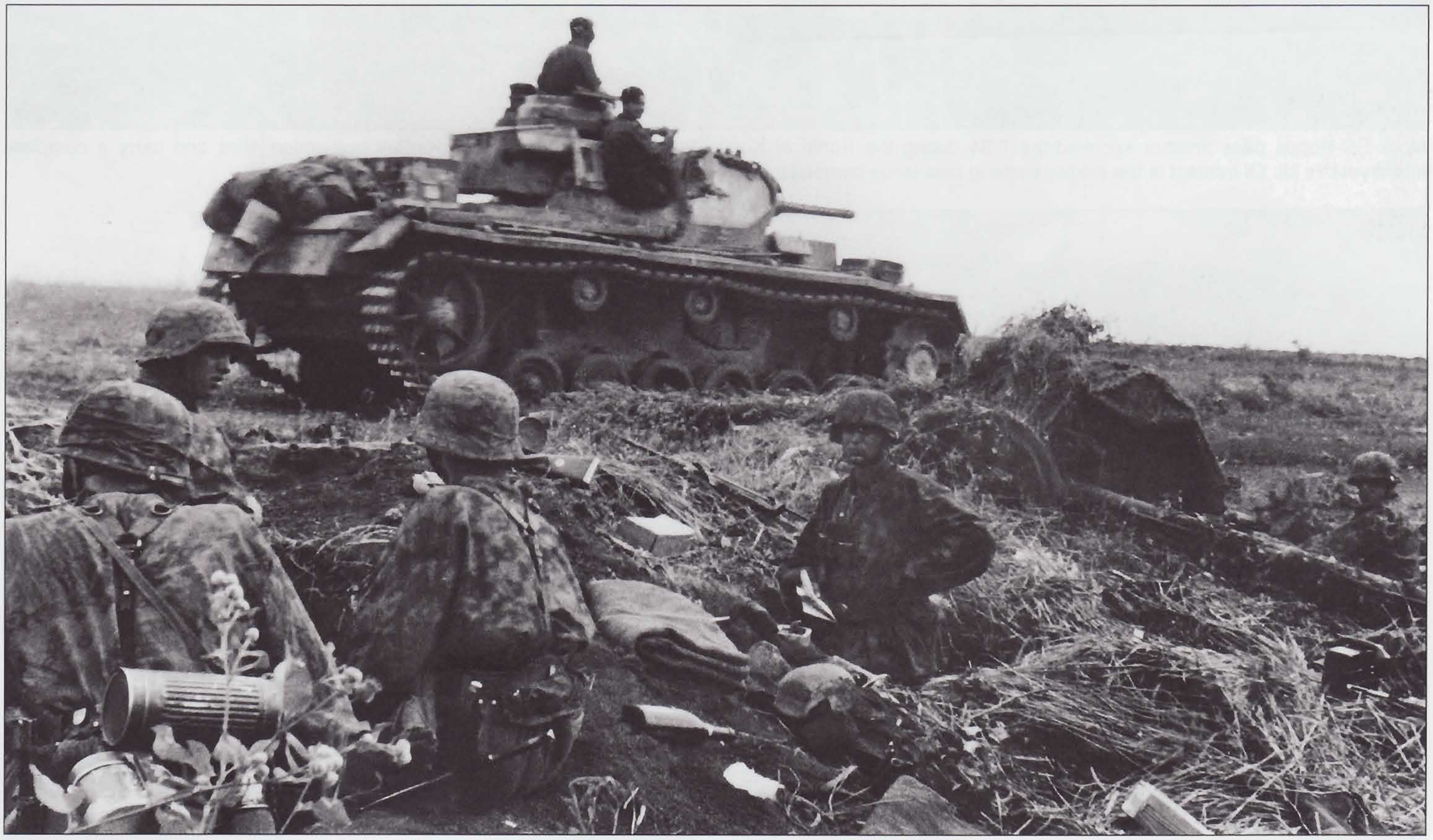




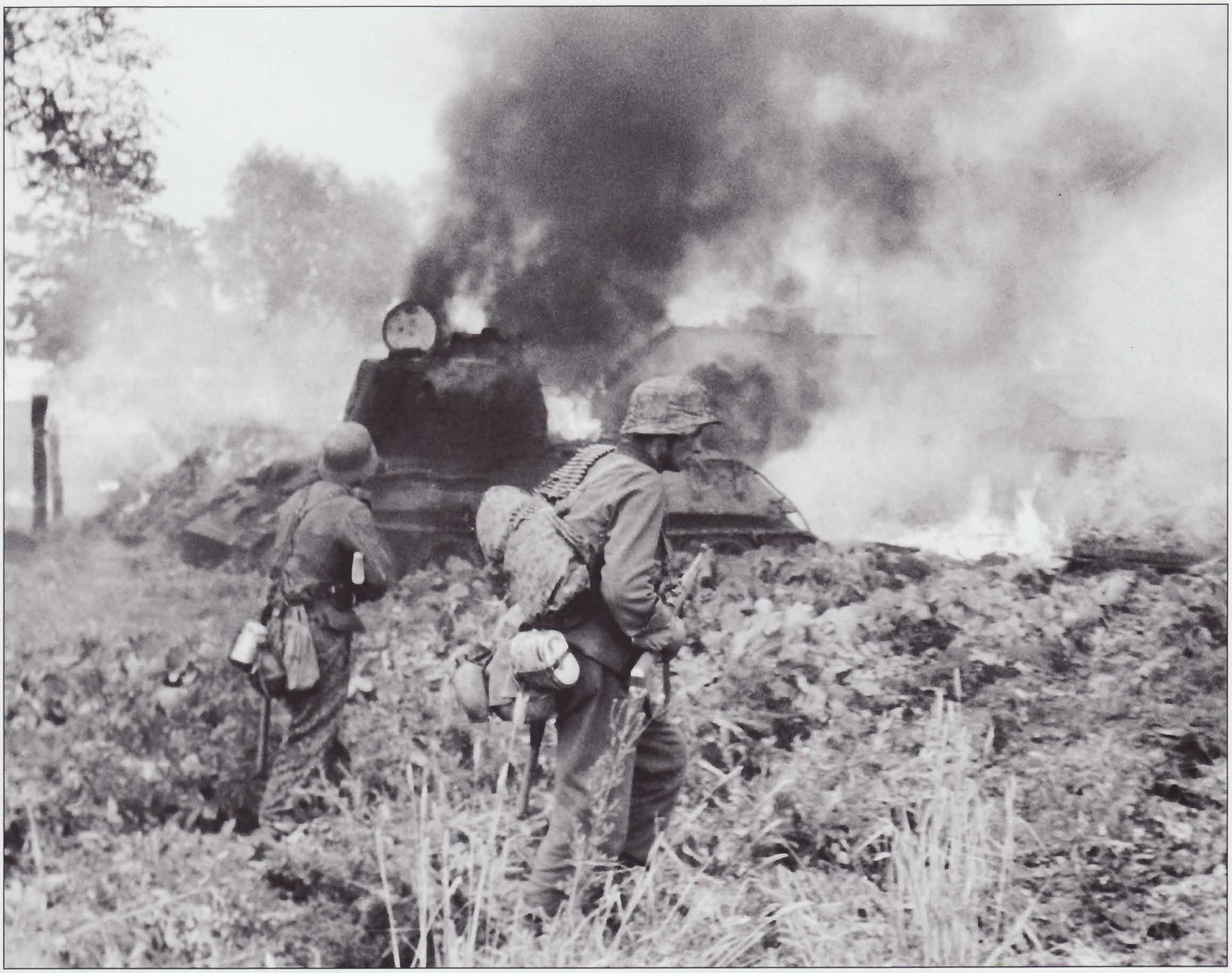
Two photographs taken in sequence showing SS soldiers passing a knocked-out T-34/85 tank in a field. It is burning after receiving a direct hit from antitank fire. An NCO running away from the exploding vehicle is armed with an MP40 machine pistol.



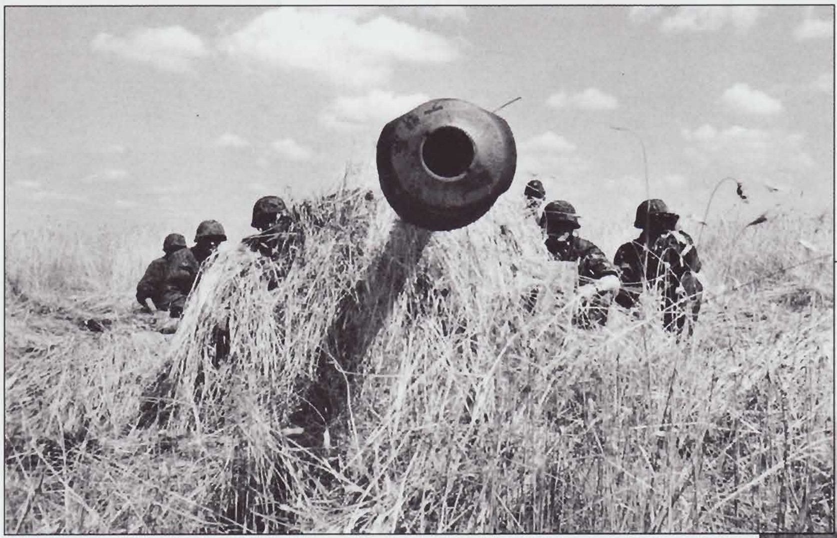
A StuG.III Ausf.G advances along a road during the Battle of Kursk, passing a knocked-out T-34/76. Foliage has been applied over the vehicle in order to try and conceal its distinctive shape from aerial detection. Note the additional armor plating bolted to the front of the vehicle. The StuG belongs to the "Das Reich" StuG-Abteilung, which was added to the division in 1943.



A gun crew with their heavily camouflaged 7.5cm PaK40 gun is dug in during bitter fighting against strong Soviet positions. A Pz.Kpfw.III Ausf.J armed with a 5cm L/42 gun passes a group of antitank gunners wearing the "oak leaf" and "palm tree" pattern camouflage smocks. One soldier on the left, however, is wearing an early-style "palm" pattern camouflage smock.

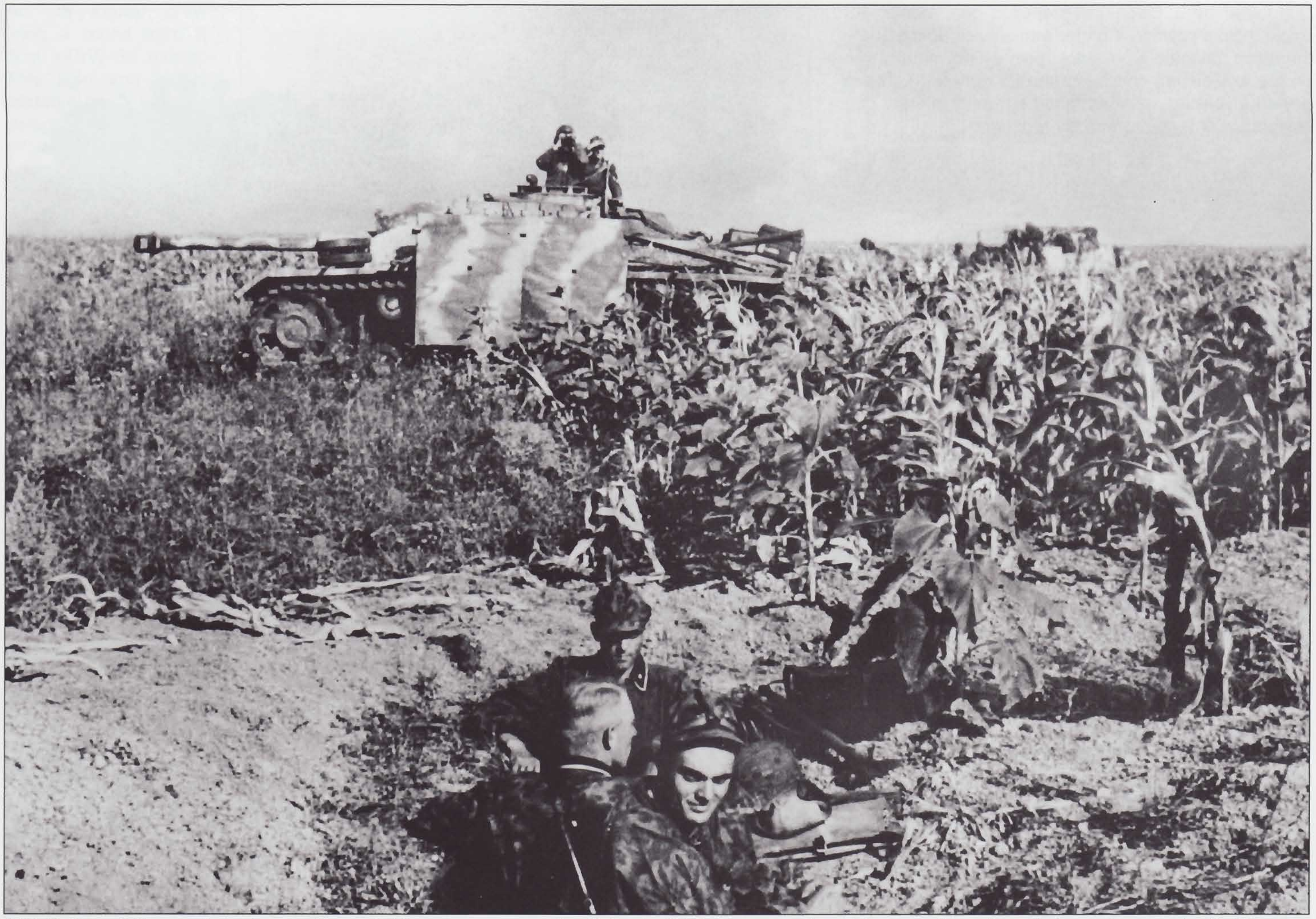


More SS troops pass another knocked-out T-34 during the Battle of Kursk. Both men are armed with Kar98k bolt-action rifles and carry a complete infantryman's kit. Of interest is the soldier wearing new-issue camouflaged trousers printed in the "pea" pattern.

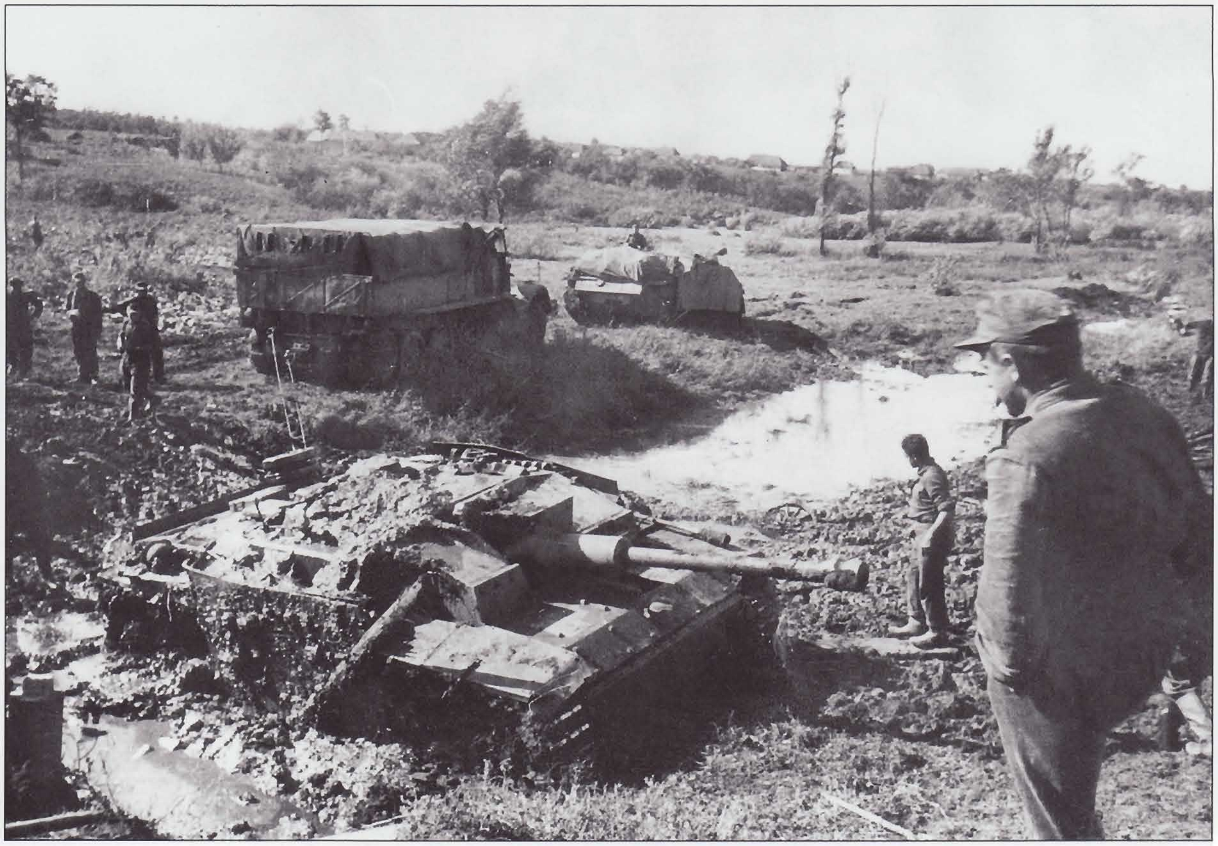


A 7.5cm PaK40 sited in a cornfield. The contrast between the dark camouflaged gun and the SS camouflage smocks can be clearly seen in this photograph, making the crew possible targets for both enemy ground and aerial attacks.

A file of troopers approaches enemy lines across a killing field with the support of StuG and Pz.Kpfw.III combat vehicles. "Das Reich" played an important part in the Kursk struggles and won many successes, gaining ground and destroying large numbers of enemy forces.

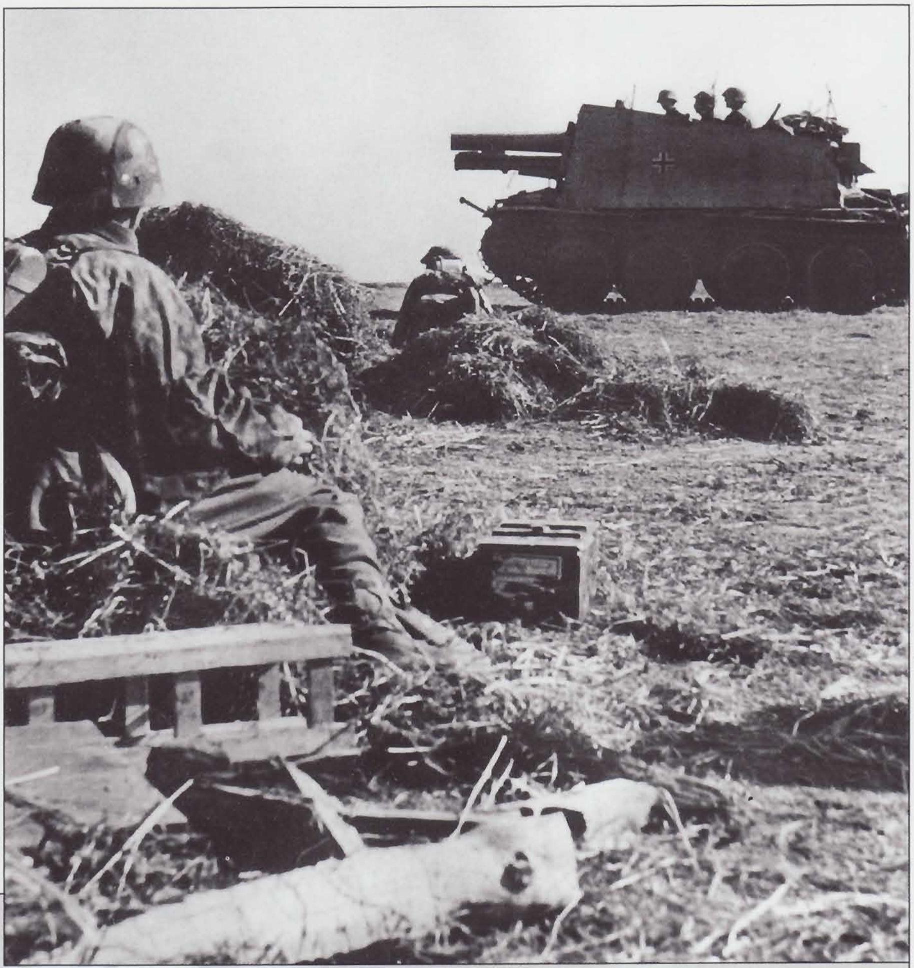


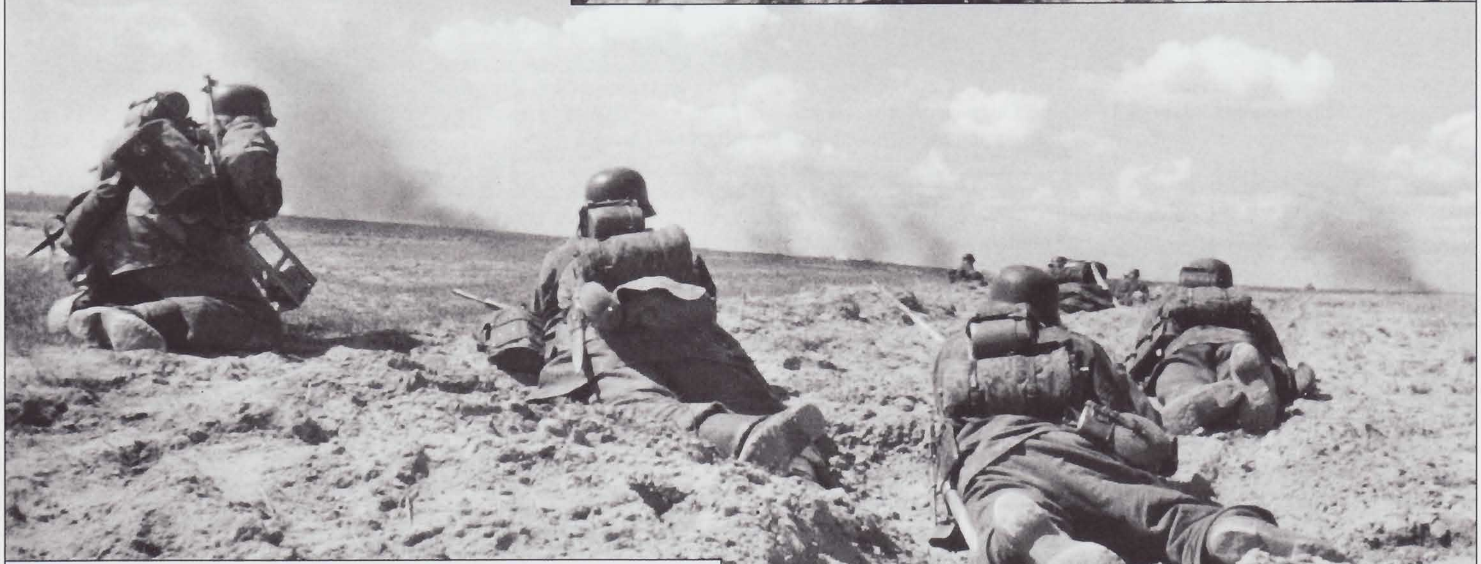
A StuG.III Ausf.G assault gun in a sunflower field passes a group of well-dug-in SS Panzergrenadiers. The assault gun has obviously been embroiled in some heavy fighting as it has lost some of its armored side-skirts. The vehicle is finished in a dark sand color, and has a textbook camouflage scheme of green and brown patches applied over the whole of its armor, including the barrel and side-skirts.



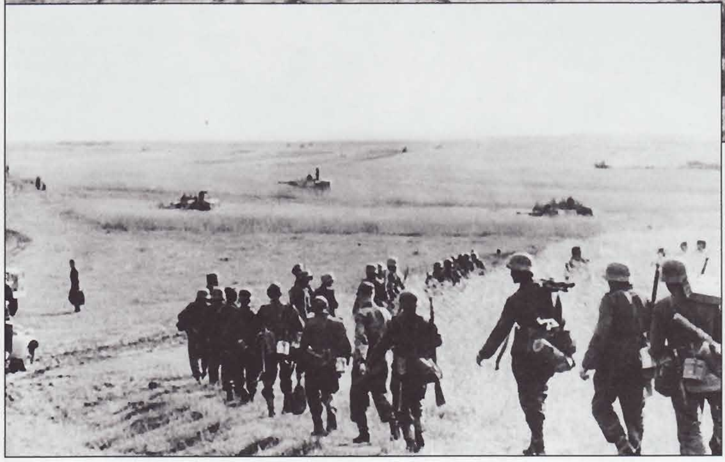
Soldiers from a "Das Reich" StuG-Abteilung unit watch as their StuG.III Ausf.G assault gun is towed out of the mire by a heavy Sd.Kfz.9 prime mover and another StuG.III.

Supported by a Bison self-propelled gun, Waffen-SS troops hold a position. Coming into service during 1943, the Bison mounted a powerful 15cm s.IG33 infantry gun on the well-proven chassis of the Pz.Kpfw.38(t). These powerful vehicles were assigned to heavy infantry gun companies of Panzergrenadier regiments.



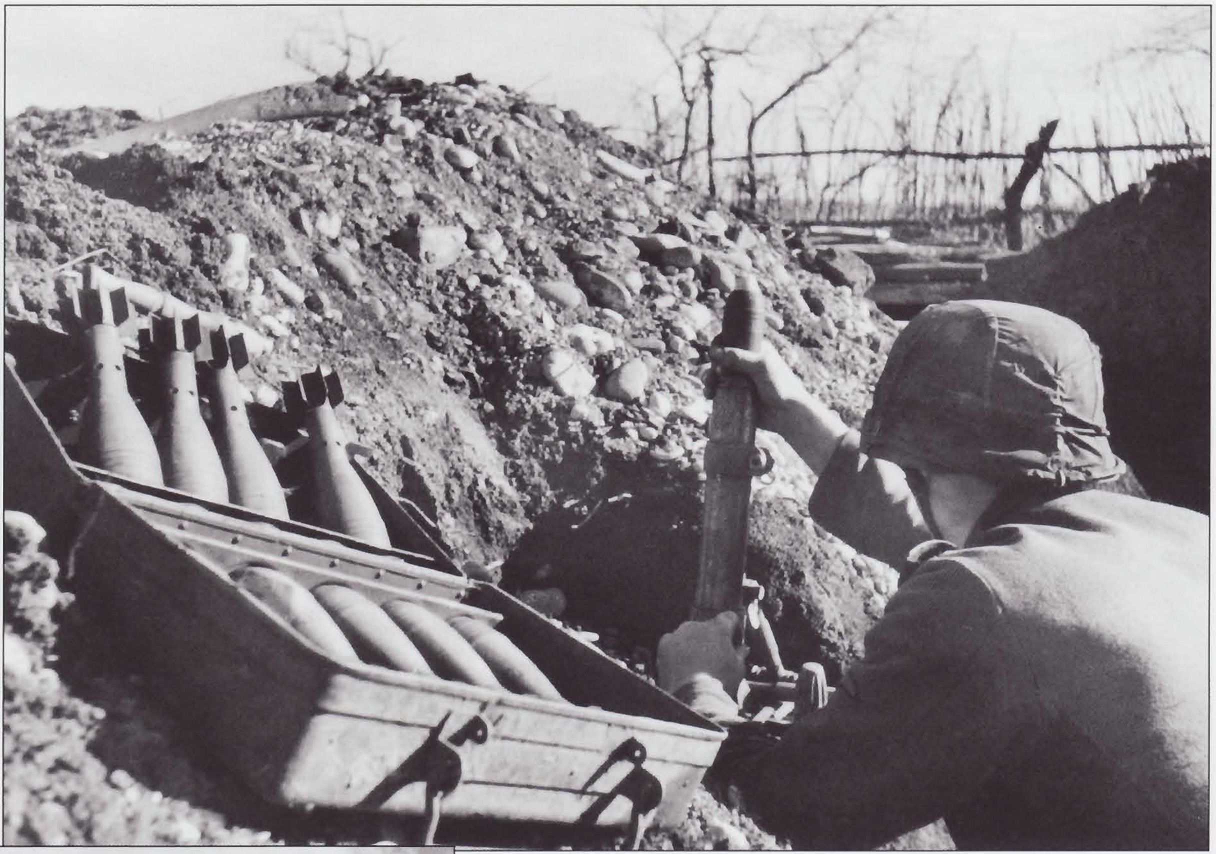


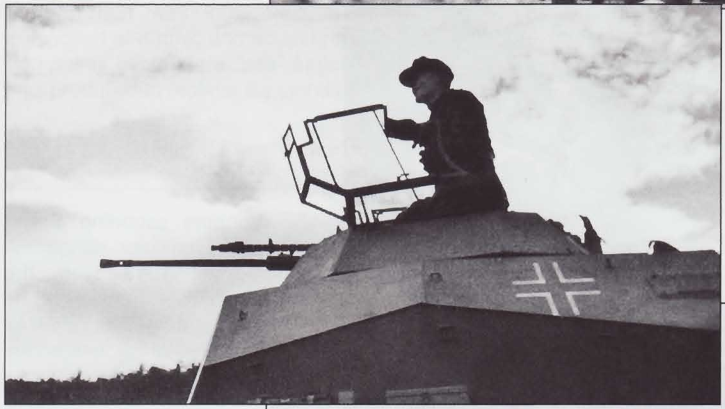
SS assault troops prepare to go forward into action. At Kursk, due to the vast open areas, soldiers were constantly exposed to hostile fire, and this increased casualties drastically, especially among Waffen-SS units.



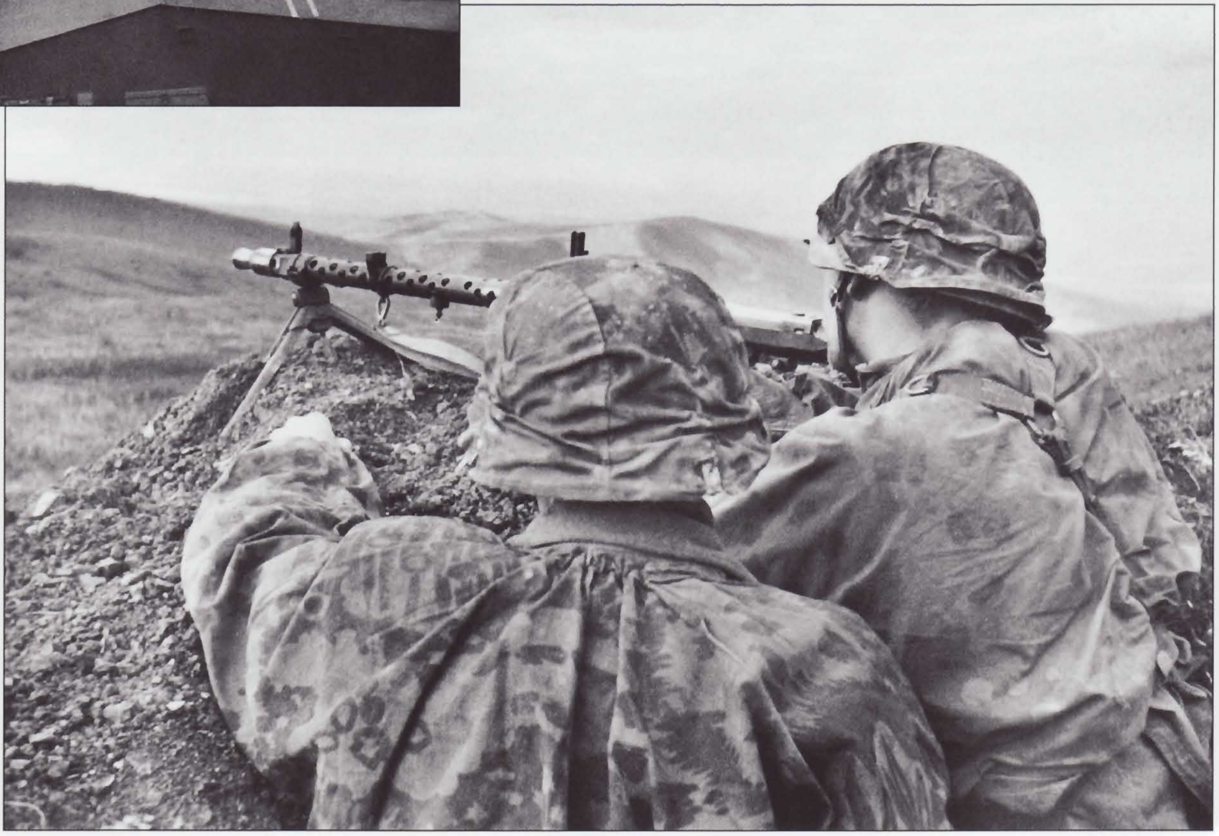
A line of infantrymen marches to a new position supported by StuGs and Panzer somewhere in the Ukraine. The battle groups that supported the armored advance had such a vast expanse of terrain to cover that they constantly became over extended as a result.

An SS mortar crew firing a round from a 5cm leGrW 36 mortar. This light and highly portable weapon designed primarily for infantry platoons, was unable to contain the overwhelming enemy due to its inaccurate firing.

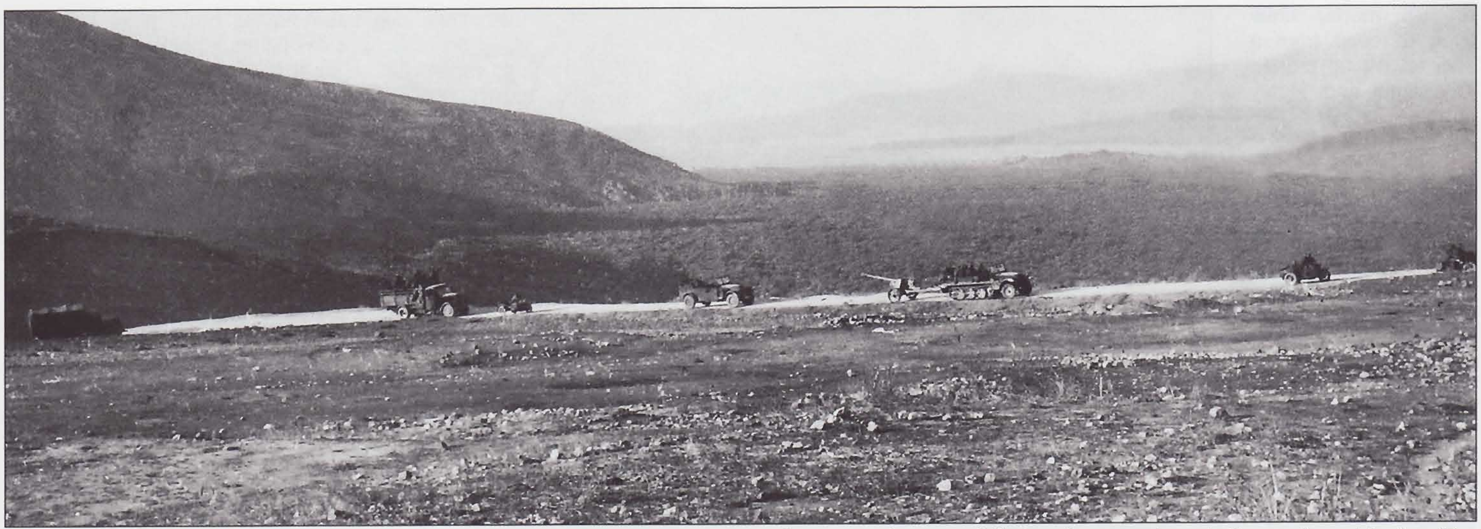




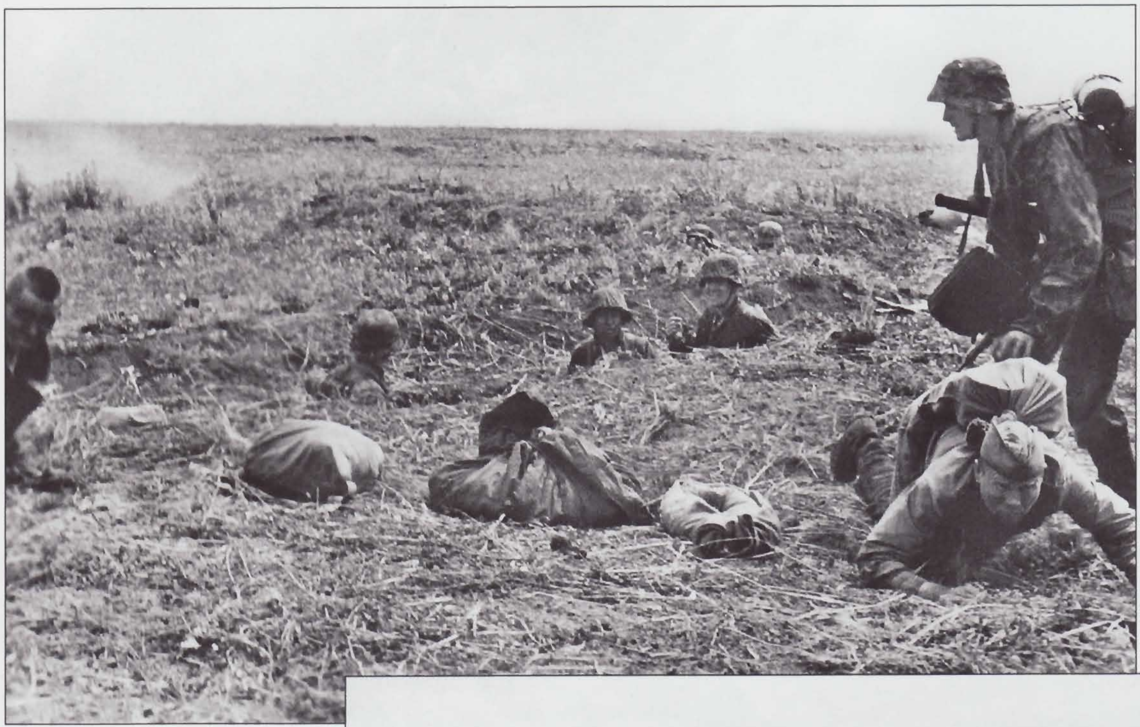
A Waffen-SS soldier can be seen in an armored Sd.Kfz.250 reconnaissance vehicle during a reconnaissance mission along the frontlines. Used by reconnaissance battalions (Aufklärungs-Abteilung) of Panzer divisions, the type performed well enough in countries with good road networks like those in Western Europe. However, on the Eastern Front and in North Africa, this class of vehicle was hampered by its relatively poor off-road performance. The Sd.Kfz.250/9 was an Sd.Kfz.250 fitted with the same turret as the Sd.Kfz.222.



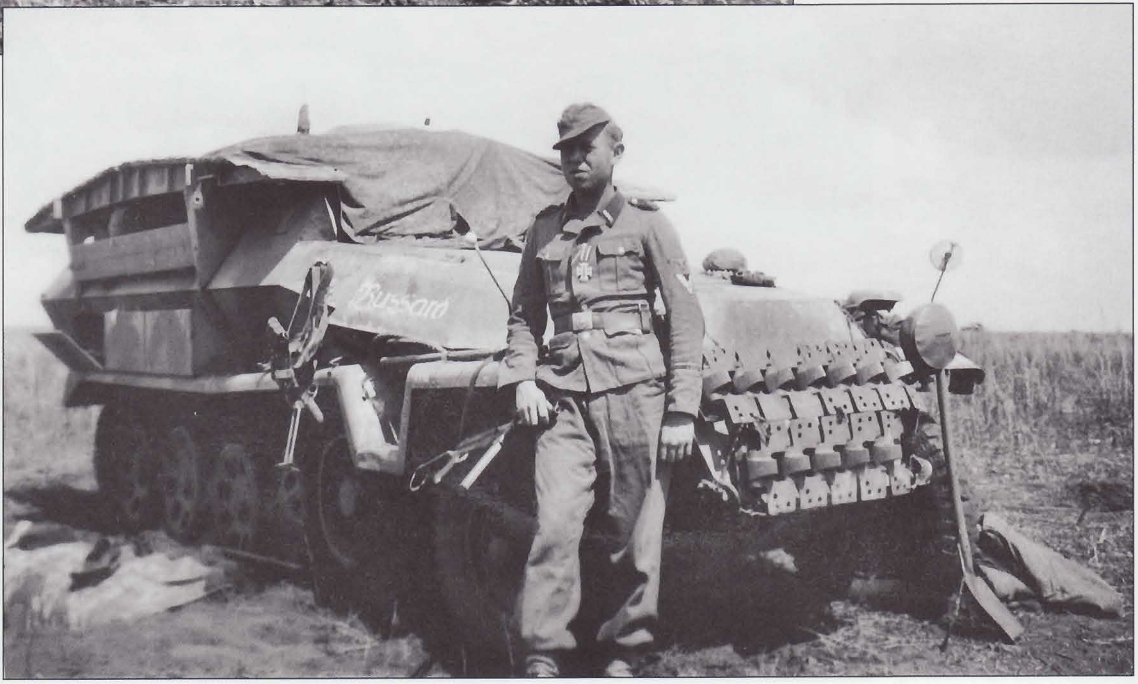
An MG34 position in hilly terrain, probably somewhere in the southern Ukraine. The MG crew is wearing the printed "palm tree" camouflage smock. In fluid tactical situations, the MG34 in a light machinegun role could easily be pushed forward and used either in open ground, built-up areas or forests.



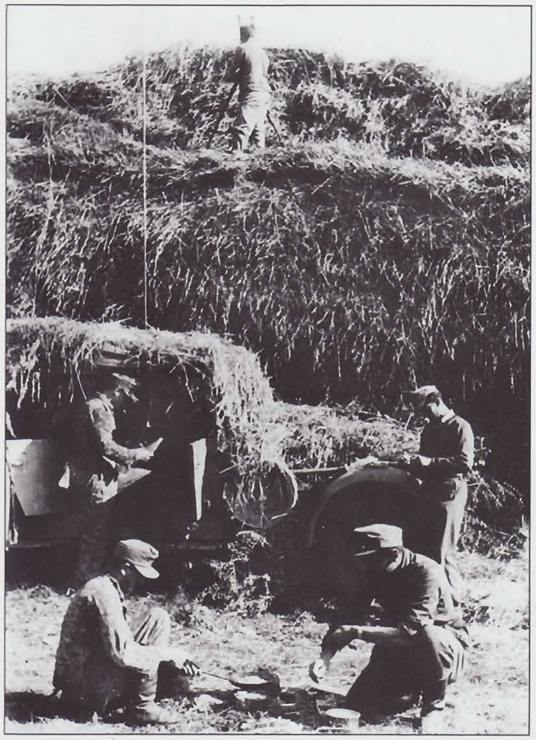
A column of "Das Reich" vehicles, probably part of the divisional Panzerjäger-Abteilung, travels across hilly terrain somewhere in the southern Ukraine. The leading vehicle is an Sd.Kfz.10 towing a 7.5cm PaK40. The whole battalion was rearmed with 7.5cm guns during the summer of 1943, and one of the companies used self-propelled guns on a tracked chassis.



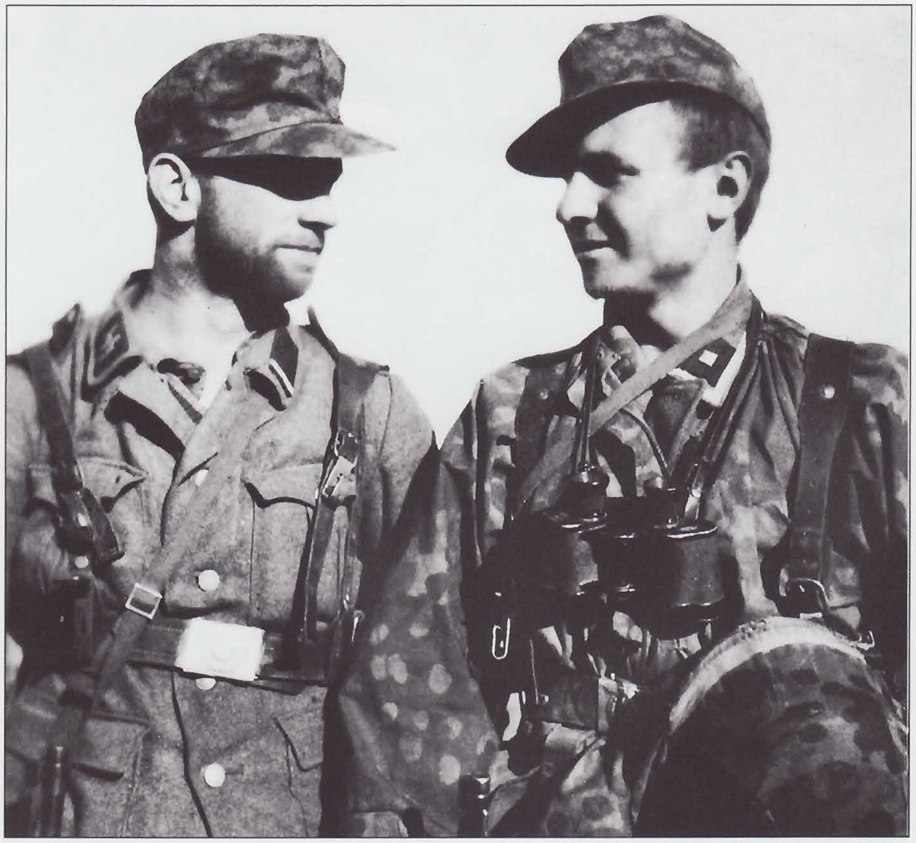
SS troopers escorting Soviet POWs to the rear during the summer of 1943. Note the soldier on the extreme right; he is equipped with an M41 flamethrower, which was a very effective weapon against targets at close ranges.



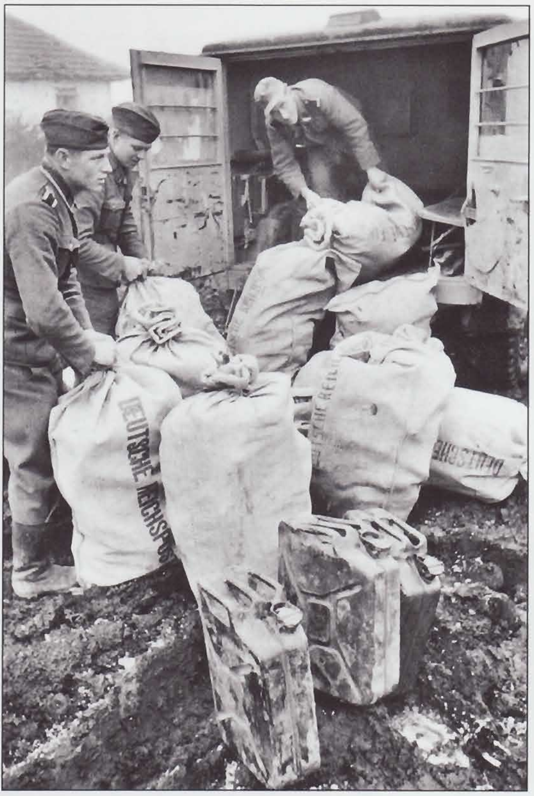
An SS soldier armed with an MP40 of the SS-Korps poses for the camera after being decorated with an Eisernenkreuz during the summer of 1943. Behind him is a stationary Sd.Kfz.251. Note the track links attached to the vehicle's front glacis in order to increase its armored protection. Painted in white on the side of the vehicle is the name "Bussard". (MK photo)



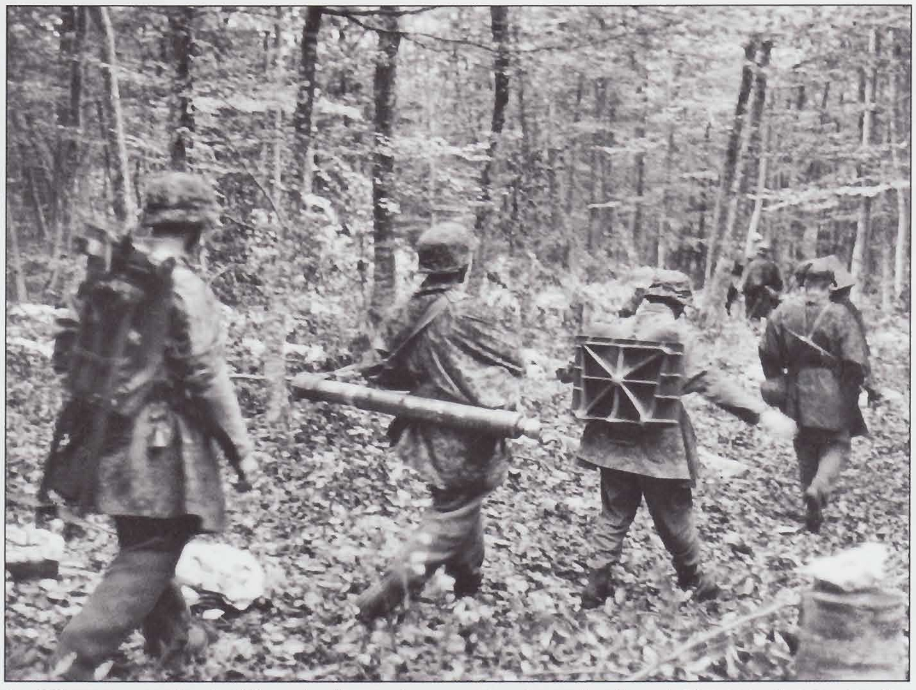
A well-camouflaged observation post for the unit's staff during the summer of 1943. Troops can be seen cooking food in front of a well-concealed radio vehicle covered with straw. The soldiers are partly wearing the new SS uniform that was introduced in mid-1943; it was composed of a tunic and trousers made of drill material and it was printed in a "pea" pattern. The new uniform was produced to replace the standard field-gray uniform.



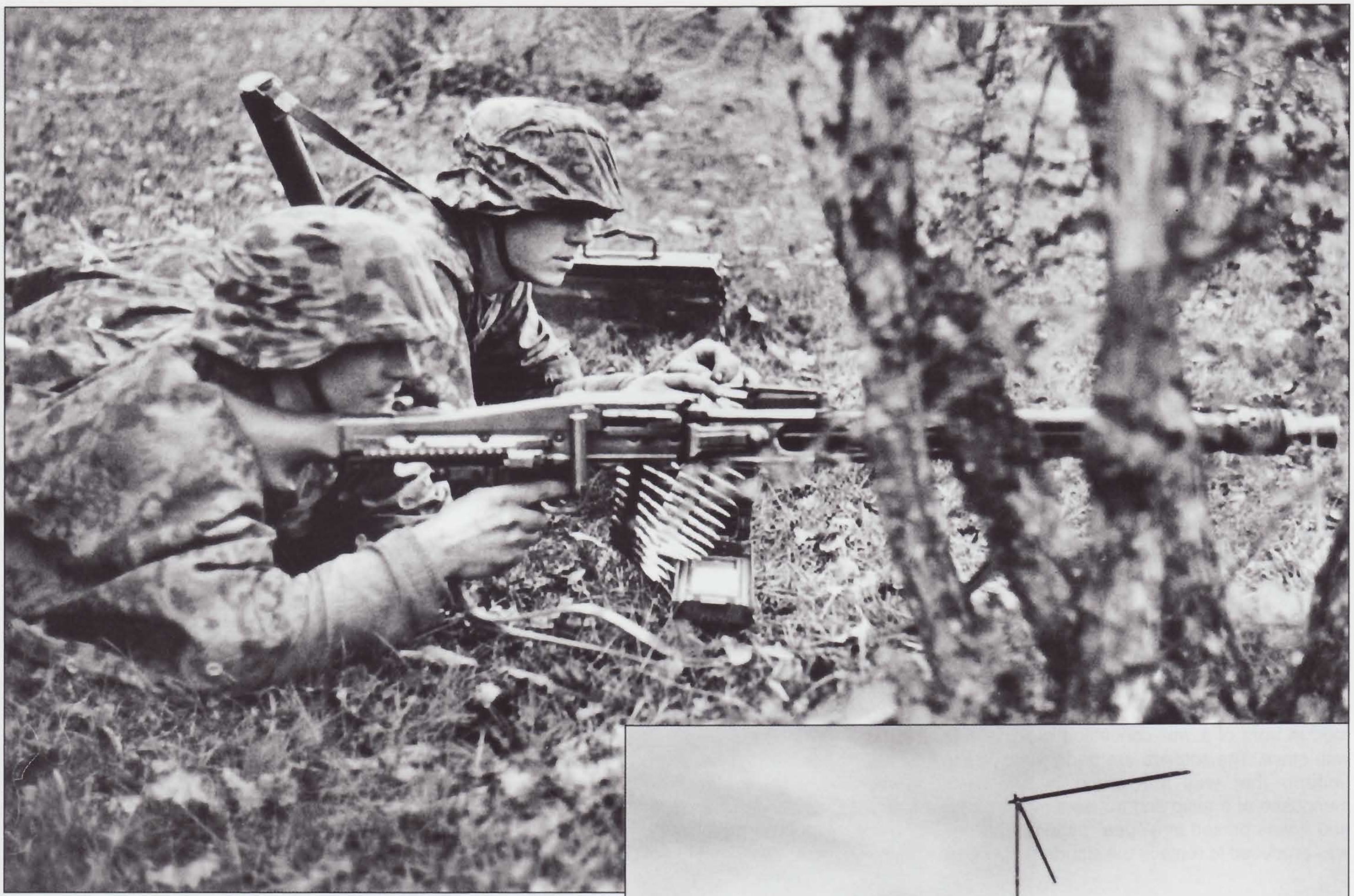
Two SS soldiers. The man on the left holds the rank of an SS-Sturmann, whilst the one on the right is an Unterscharführer. The soldier on the left wears the standard Feldgrau uniform with a camouflaged M43 field cap. His comrade on the right wears the "palm tree" smock and camouflaged M43 field cap. Both are armed with the Mauser Kar98k rifle.



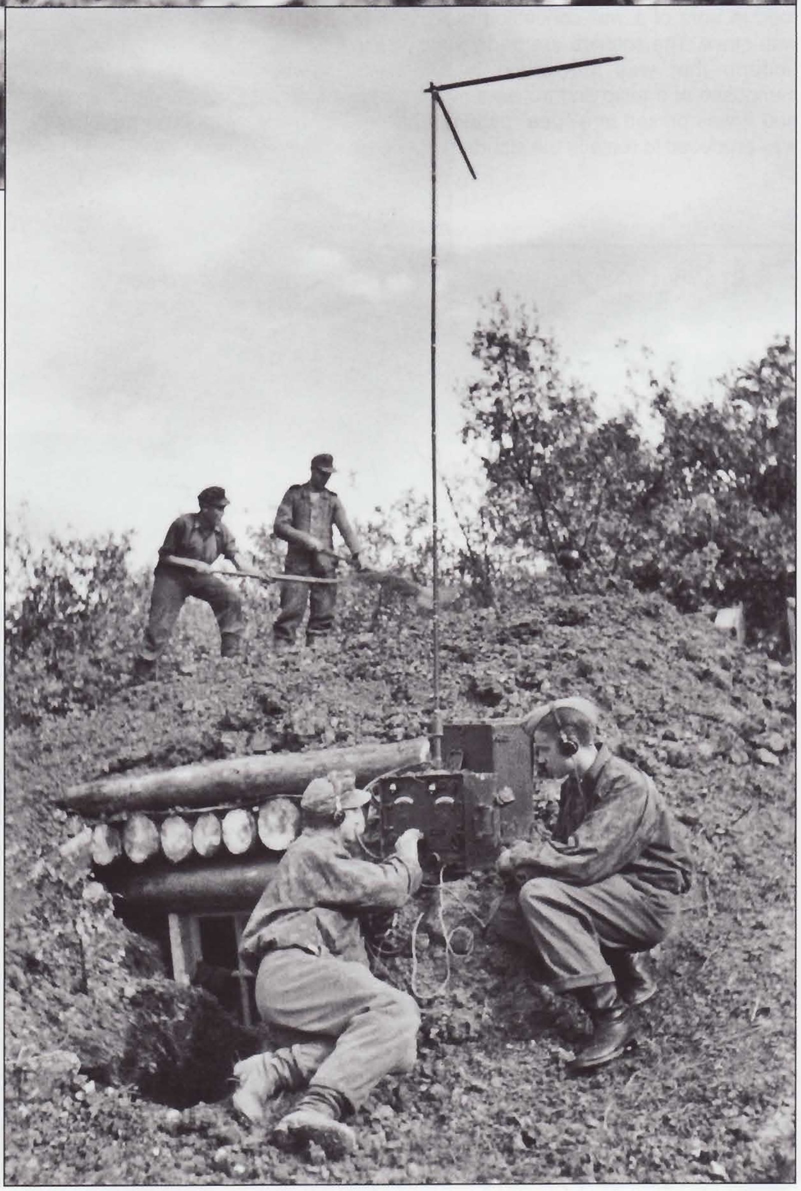
Sacks of mail stamped "German Reich Post" and containing personal letters and parcels from wives and loved ones are delivered to the front from a vehicle. For every soldier on the Eastern Front, receiving mail from home was often a morale booster and a good incentive, when so many men were missing home.



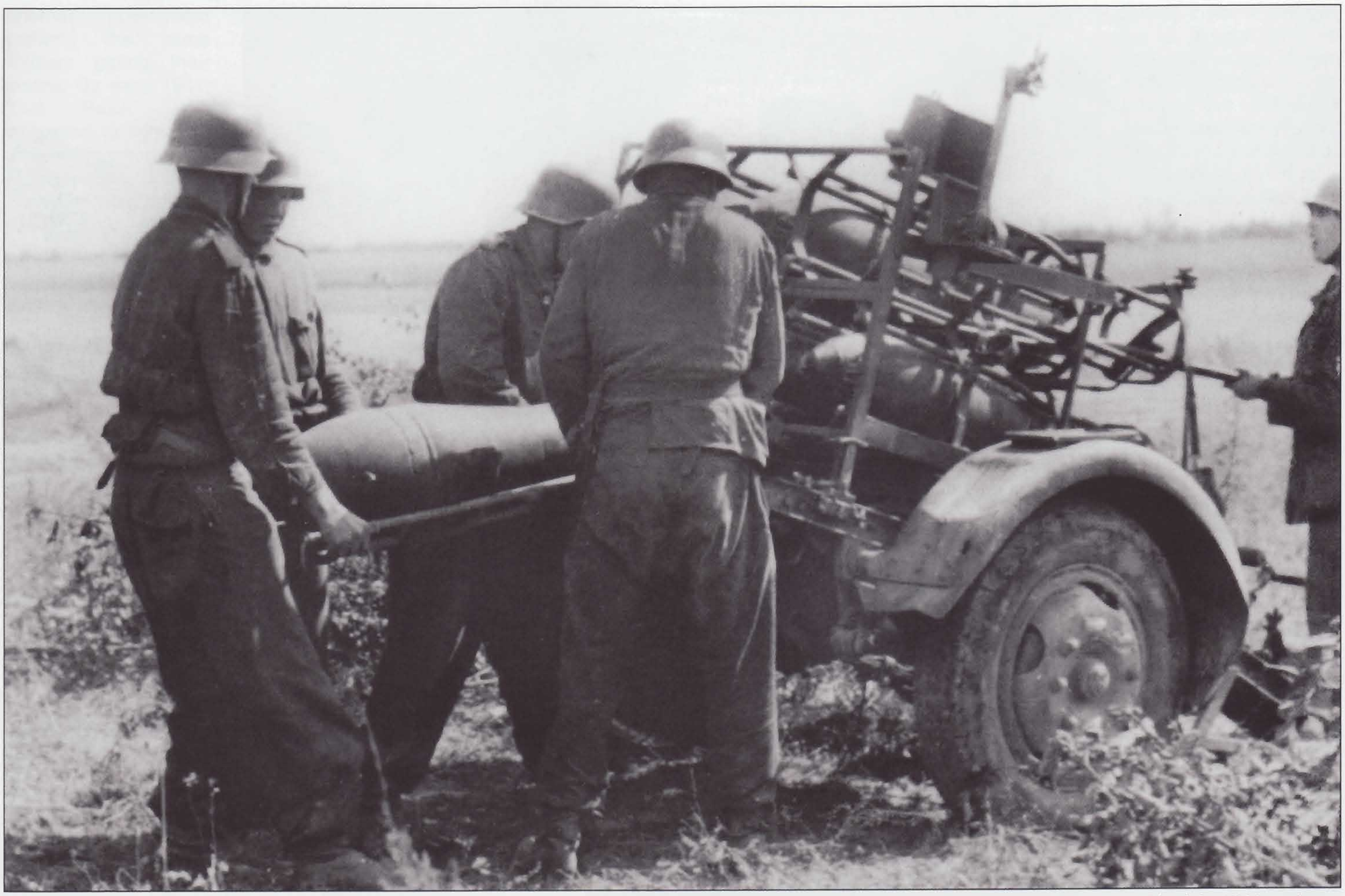
An SS mortar section in "plane tree" smocks marching through a forest. The crew is carrying the very effective and highly mobile 8cm sGrW 34 mortar, which included the weapon base-plate, barrel and mount.



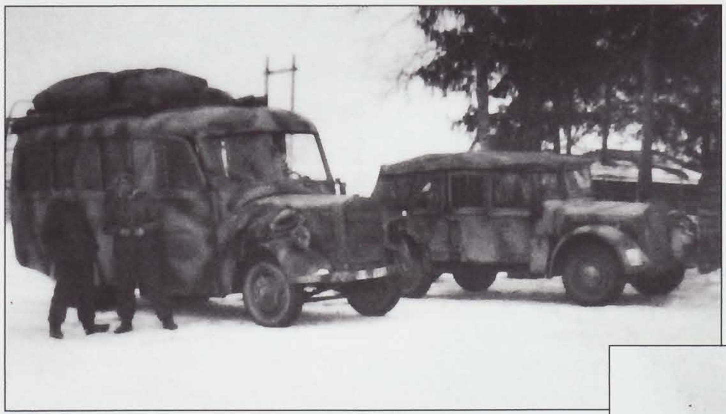
A light MG42 crew in position is preparing to go into action. Both soldiers wear the Zeltbahn printed in "oak leaf" camouflage over their field-gray woolen shirts only.



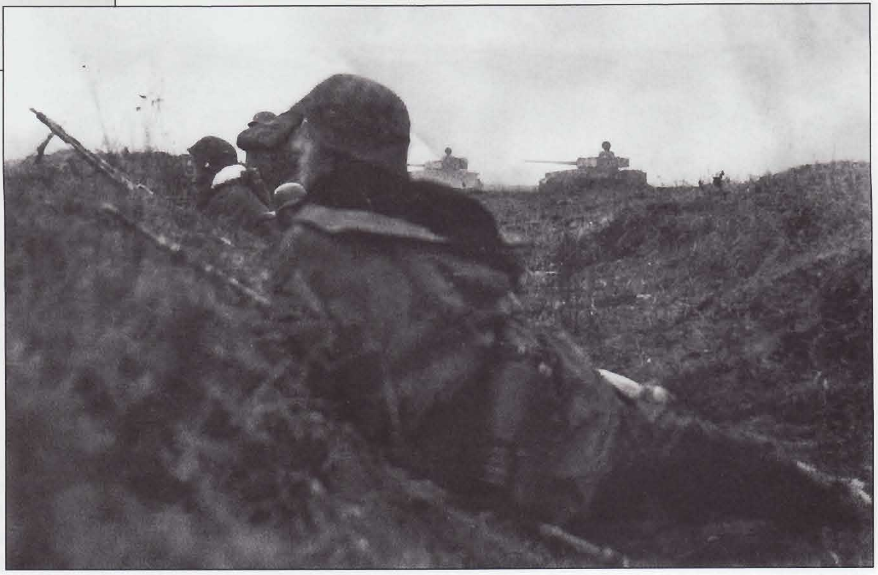
Waffen-SS radiomen with their portable Torn. Fu. B1 S/E radio pack in a dug-in position during the late summer or early autumn of 1943. Note both the upper and lower valves of the radio, which are linked via special cables.



The crew of a Nebelwerfer 42 (NbW42) is preparing to fire this deadly weapon against an enemy target. This weapon was introduced in July 1943 and was issued to the Waffen-SS only in small numbers during this period of the war.

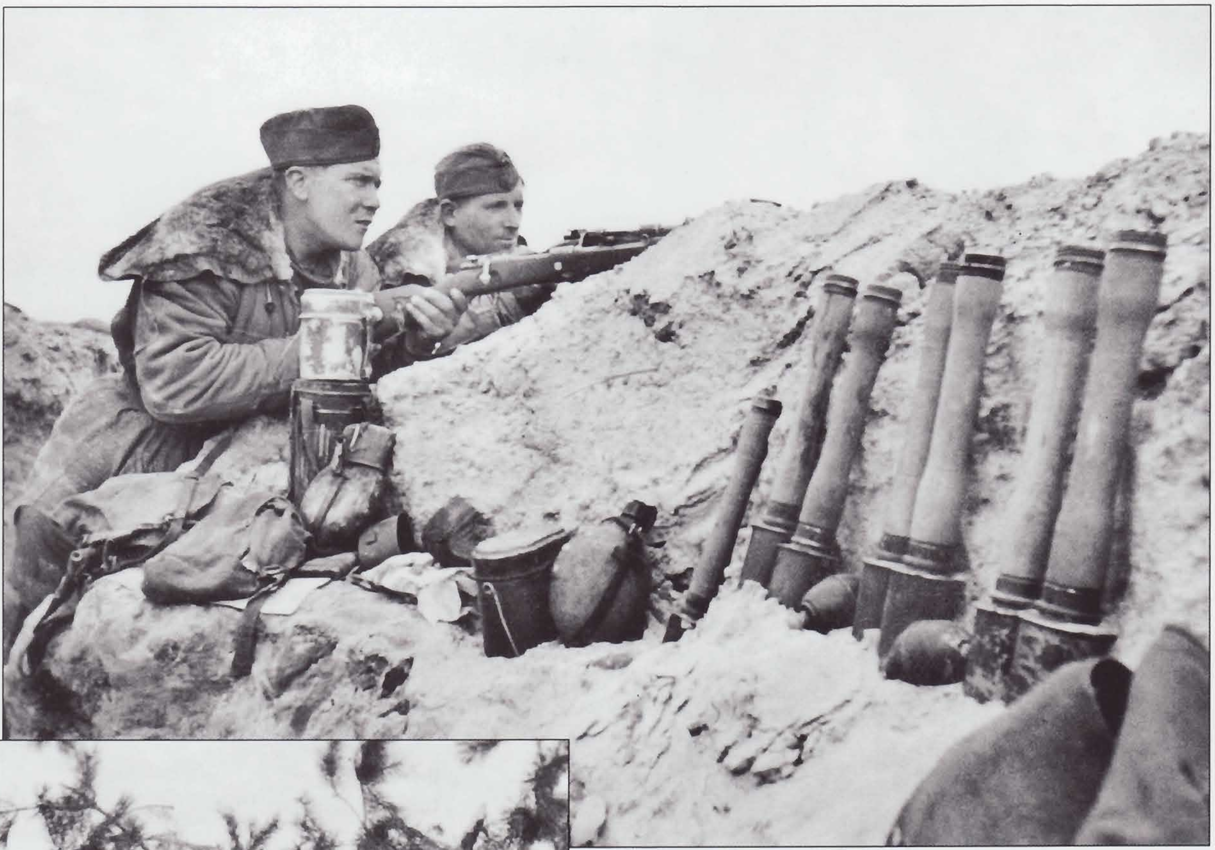


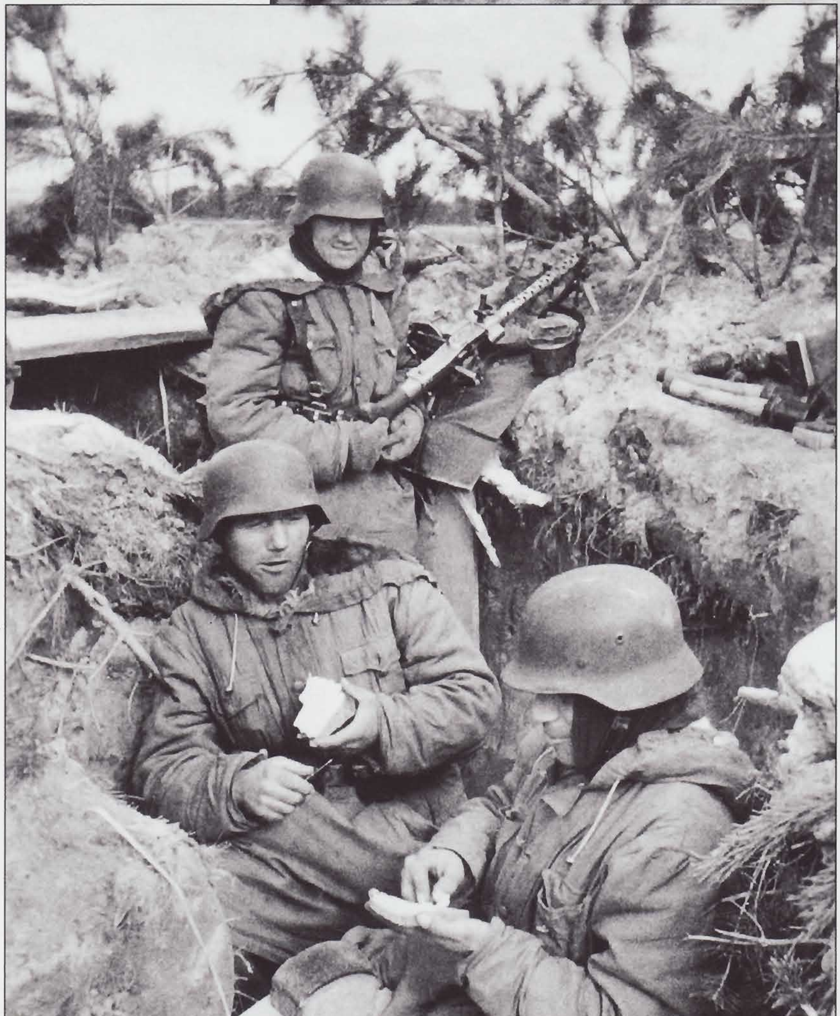
In the winter of 1943, SS staff vehicles still retaining their summer camouflage schemes can be seen halted in the snow. On the left is a staff bus built on a light Mercedes truck chassis, whilst the vehicle parked next to it is an old Kfz.4 Horch heavy personnel carrier.



A group of SS soldiers wearing their distinctive parkas takes cover in a ditch supported by a pair of Pz.Kpfw.IVs. "Das Reich", along with other premier SS divisions, was embroiled in heavy fighting across the whole of the Ukraine during the autumn and winter of 1943-44.

Two SS soldiers pose for the camera in a trench somewhere on the Eastern Front. Throughout this period, "Das Reich" and other German formations did what they could to hold back the overwhelming power of the Soviet armed forces.





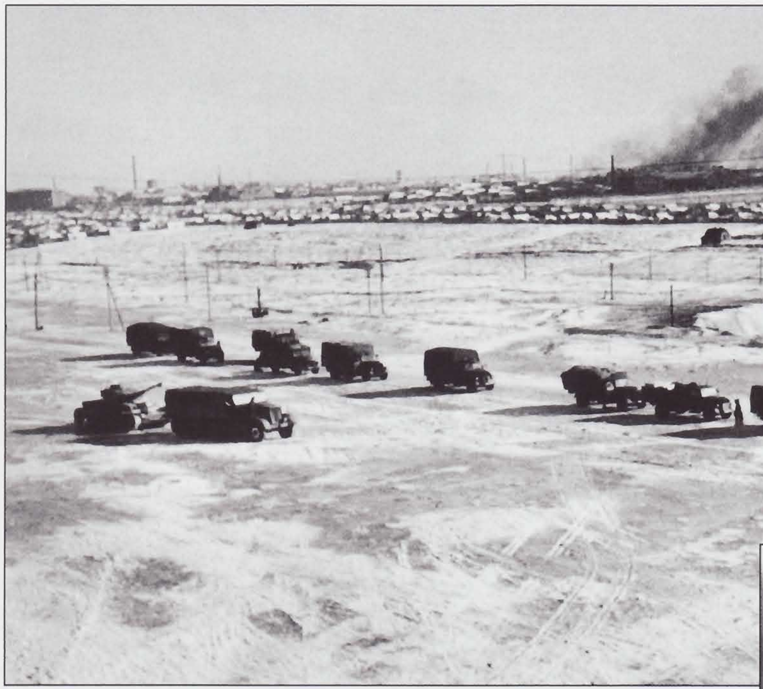
A group of SS soldiers in a ditch tuck into a much-deserved meal. All of them wear the distinctive winter parka and toque under their steel helmets. Note that the soldier in the background is armed with an MG34 machinegun with two 50- or 75- round drum magazines, which were very rare during this late period of the war.

Another photograph showing the same soldiers eating their rations. By early 1944, "Das Reich" was compelled to fight with depleted regiments and battalions and could no longer function as a full-sized division in the Ukraine.

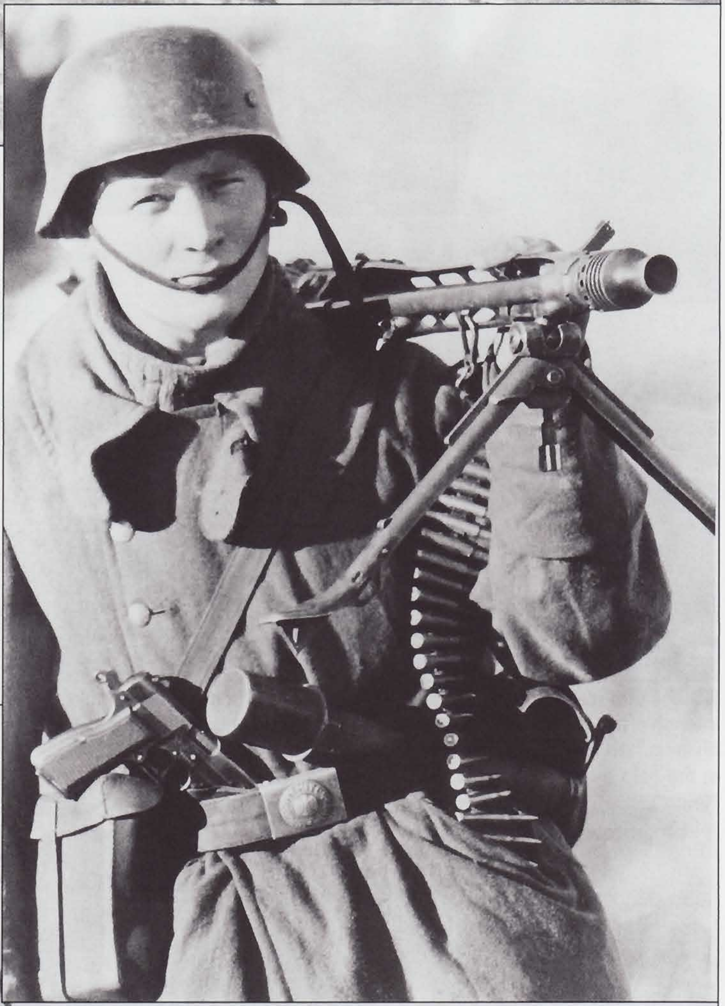
SS soldiers man-handle a 2cm FlaK38 into position in a muddy field during intensive action in the Ukraine in early 1944. By this stage of the war, the division had to be reformed into a smaller organization that would be known in the field as Panzer Battle Group "Das Reich" (Panzer-Kampfgruppe "Das Reich").

German armored vehicles of the SS-Kampfgruppe in a snow-covered field following heavy action against an enemy target. All the armored vehicles have received an application of winter whitewash paint. The Pz.Kpfw.IV in the foreground has obviously been embroiled in some heavy enemy contact and has lost part of its Schürzen as a result.

The crew of an Sd.Kfz.251 from an engineering battalion of the SS-Kampfgruppe is attempting to tow a truck out of the quagmire in early 1944. Note that the halftrack crew is transporting a dead or badly wounded comrade on the engine deck. They have attached him to the vehicle using a line.

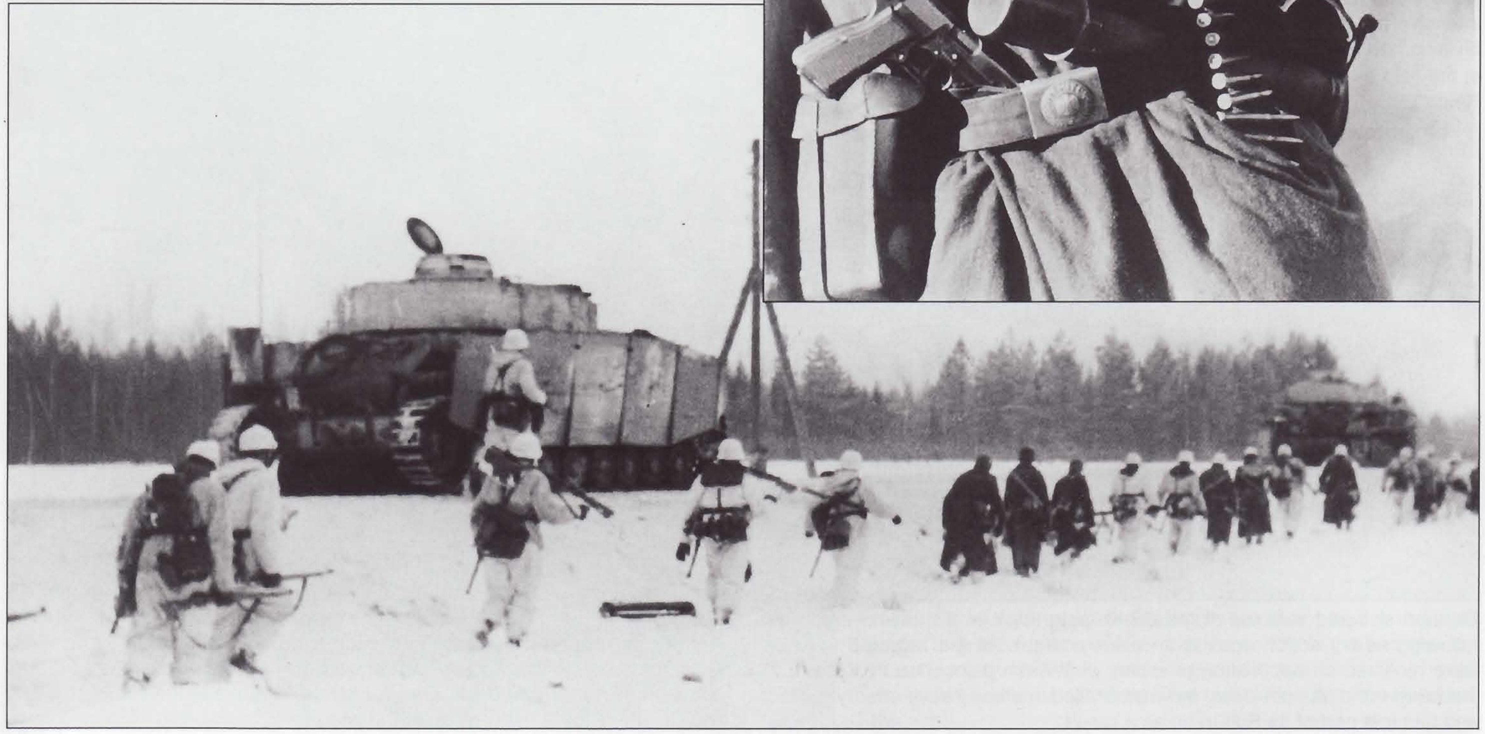


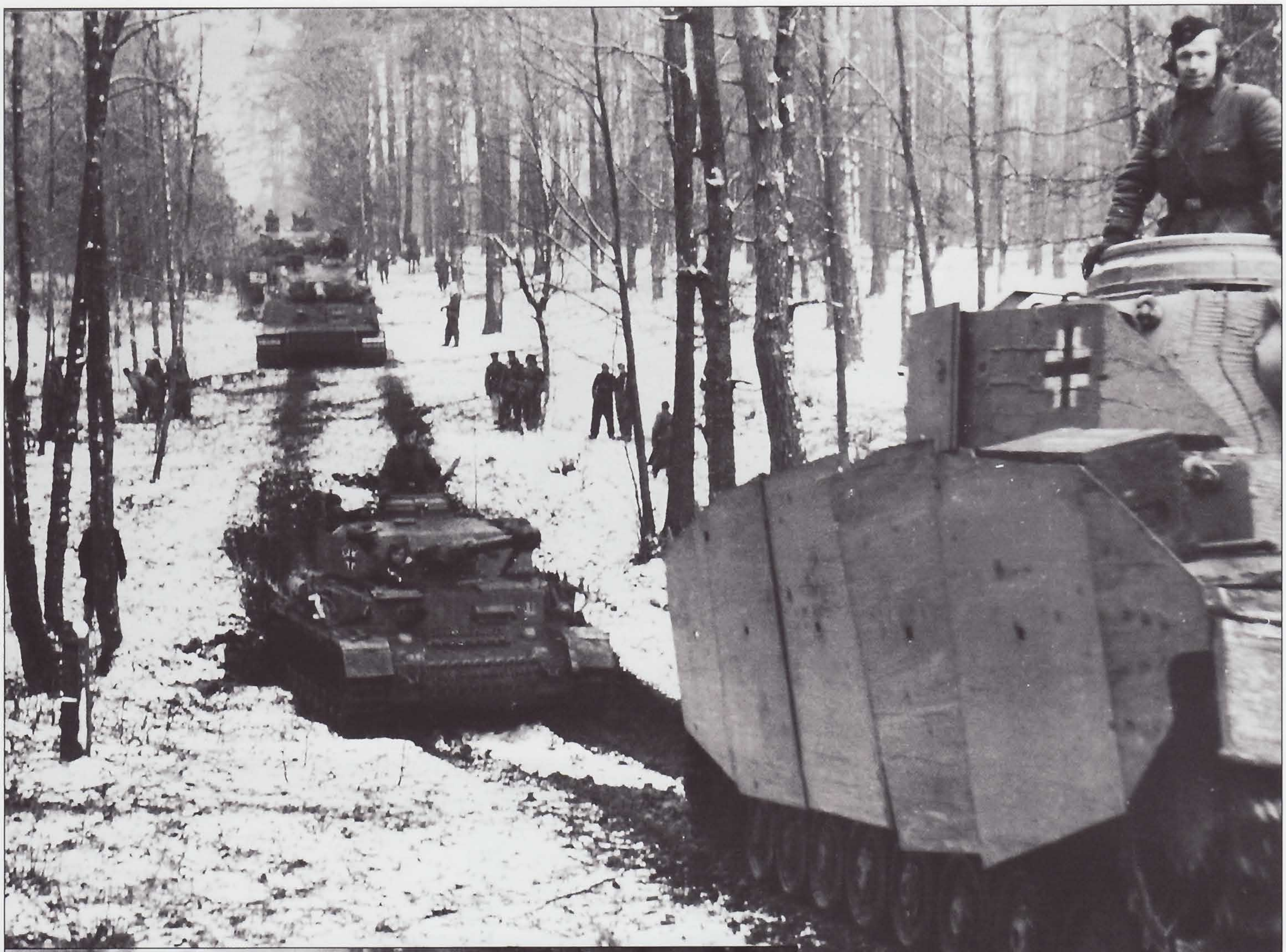
An SS transport column composed mainly of Opel Blitz trucks, accompanied by an Sd.Kfz.7 towing a damaged Pz.Kpfw.IV, passes through a Ukrainian city probably in early 1944.



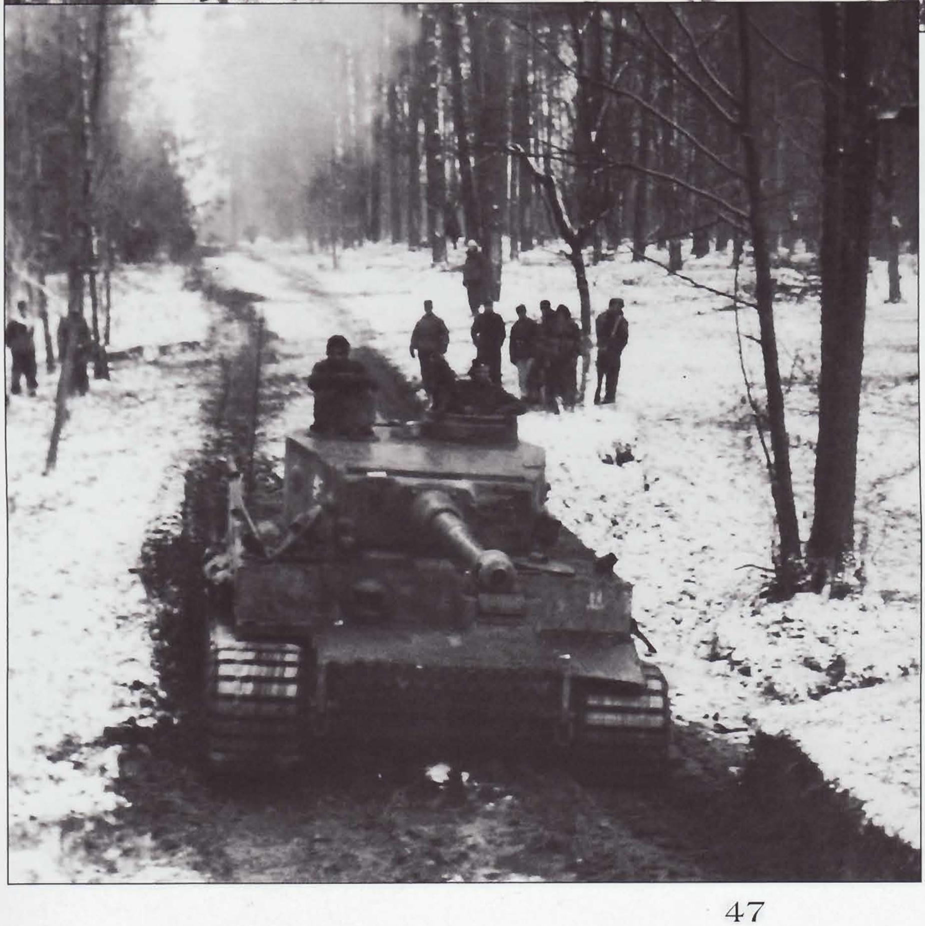
An SS MG42 machine-gunner preparing for action. During the cold weeks of early 1944, losses in the Kampfgruppe were high – one battalion was reported to be only 60 percent mobile and another only 55 percent. What made matters worse was the fact that not a single replacement had been received. So badly were they suffering that the high command had to downgrade the combat ability of the Kampfgruppe's infantry component.

A long column of soldiers heavily loaded with personal field equipment. They are wearing white and field-gray uniforms and are following a pair of Pz.Kpfw.IVs camouflaged for winter combat.



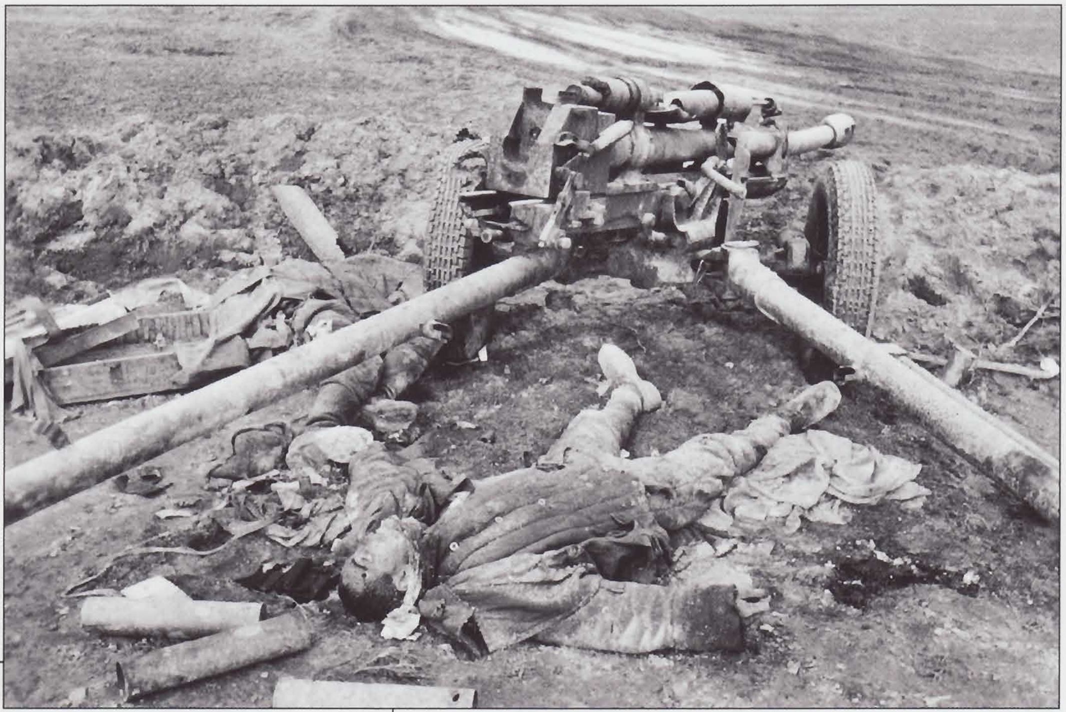


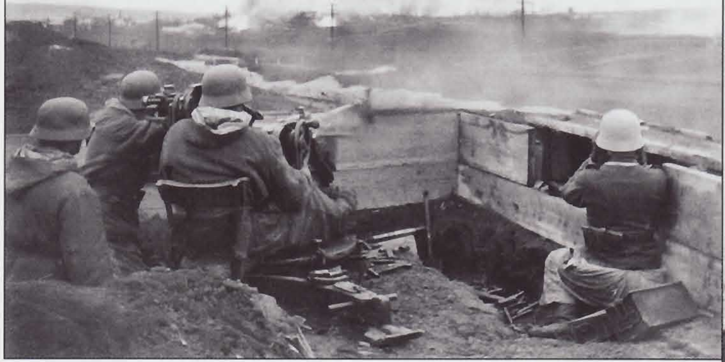
A column of Pz.Kpfw.IVs moving through a Ukrainian forest. The leading Pz.Kpfw.IV is a brand new vehicle complete with Zimmerit anti-magnetic mine paste and intact Schürzen. Note the vehicle following behind - the frontal plate of the tank's superstructure displays the "Das Reich" tactical sign.



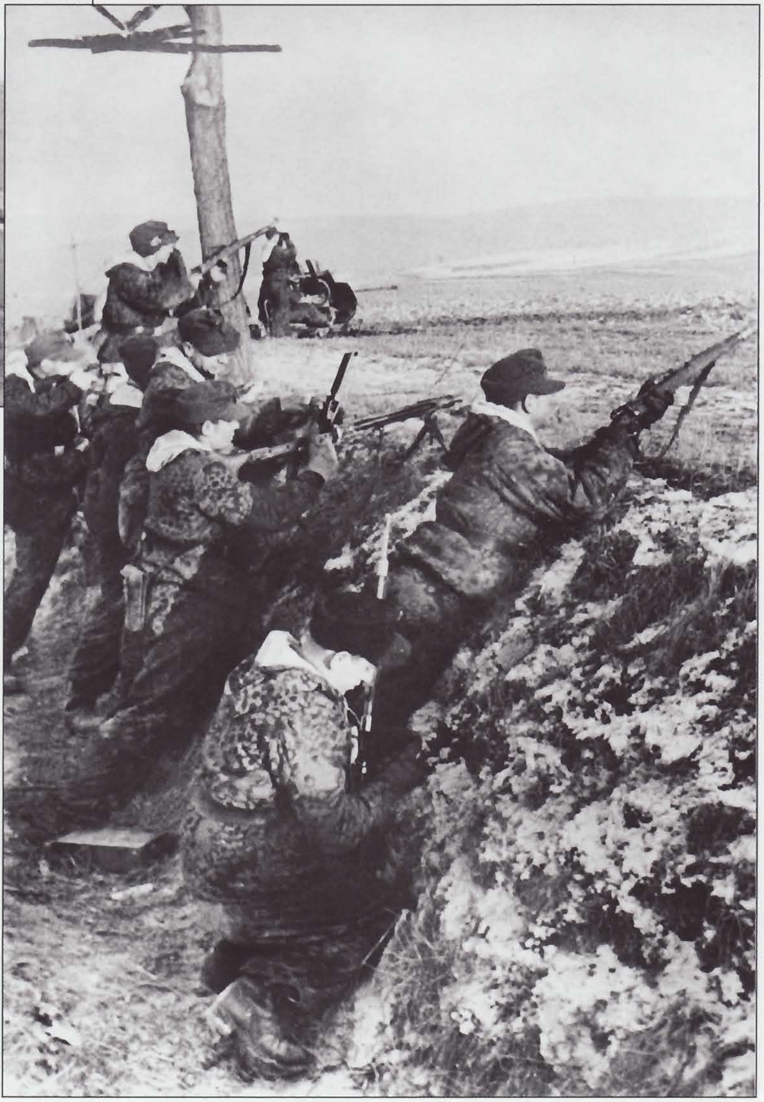
A Pz.Kpfw.VI Tiger moving through the same forest as the photo above During this period, the division only had twelve Tigers remaining in the Kampfgruppe. Note the "Kursk" tactical sign of the "Das Reich" Division still painted on the front superstructure plate.

A Russian gun position captured by SS troops in early 1944. German rounds have hit this Soviet ZiS-3 gun at least twice, destroying it and killing most of the gun crew, one of whom can be seen sprawled between the weapon's spade trails.

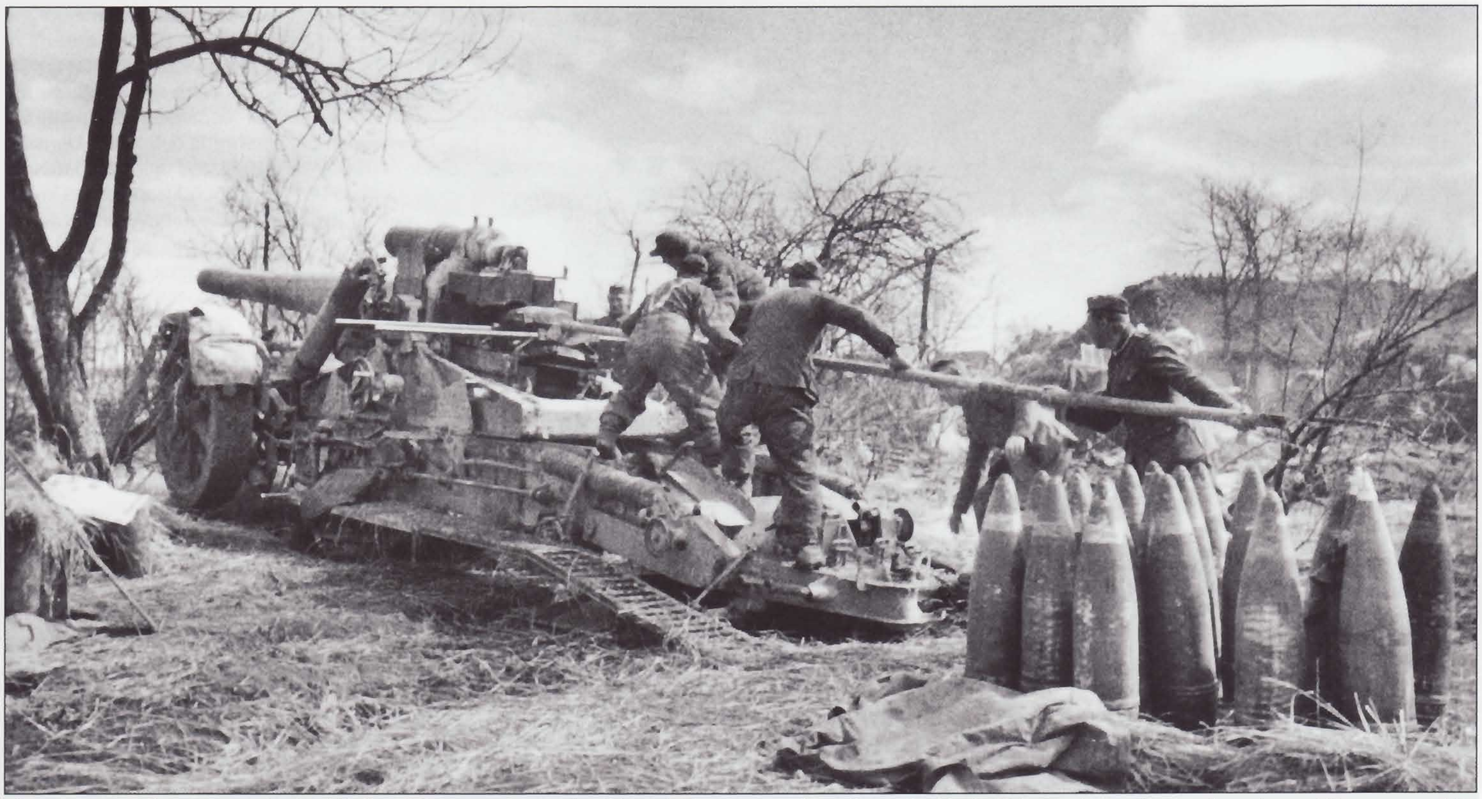




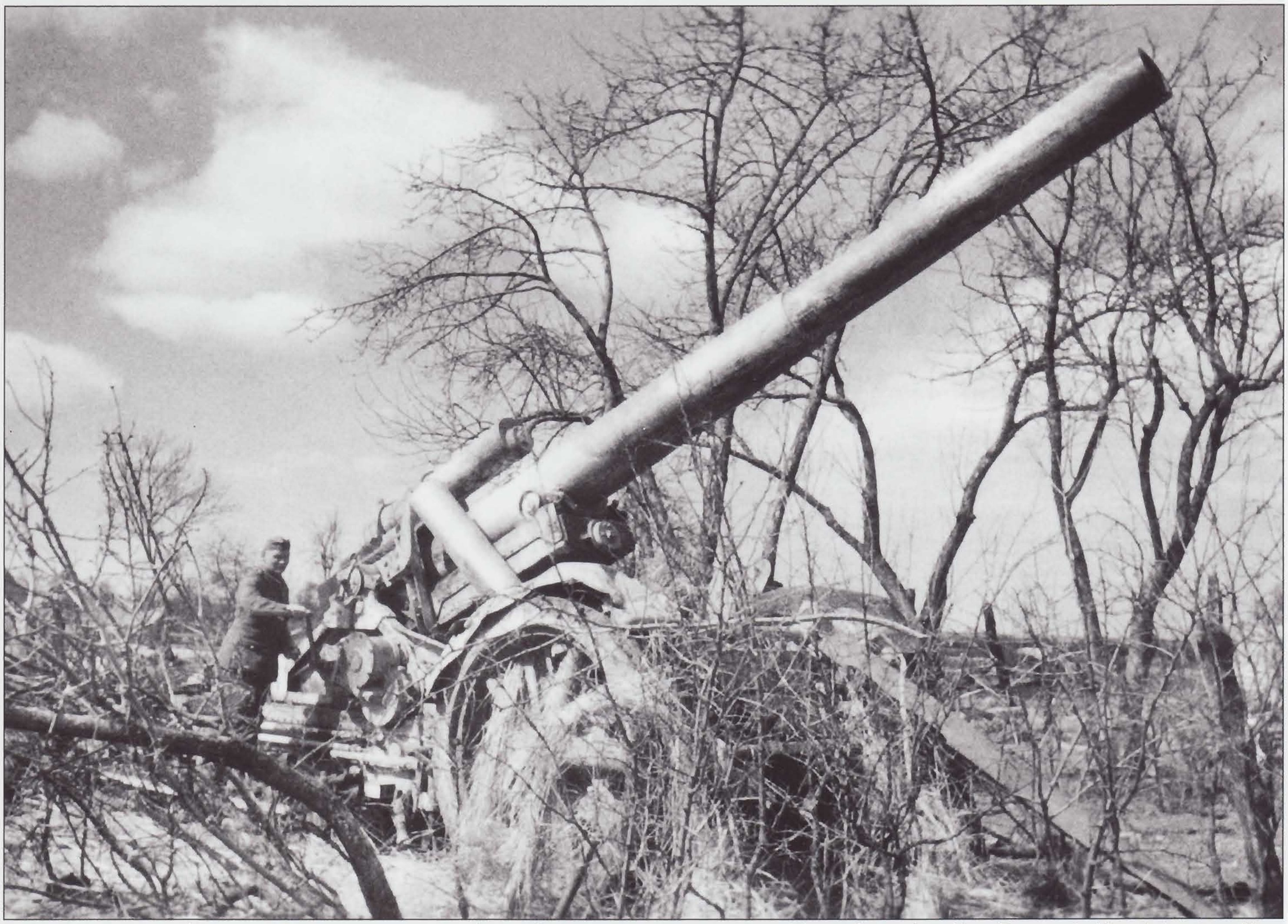
A 2cm FlaK38 gun in action against a field target in early 1944. The gun is well sited on a hill in a specially prepared defensive position. All of the flak crew, except the gun commander, is wearing winter reversible clothing, gray side out.



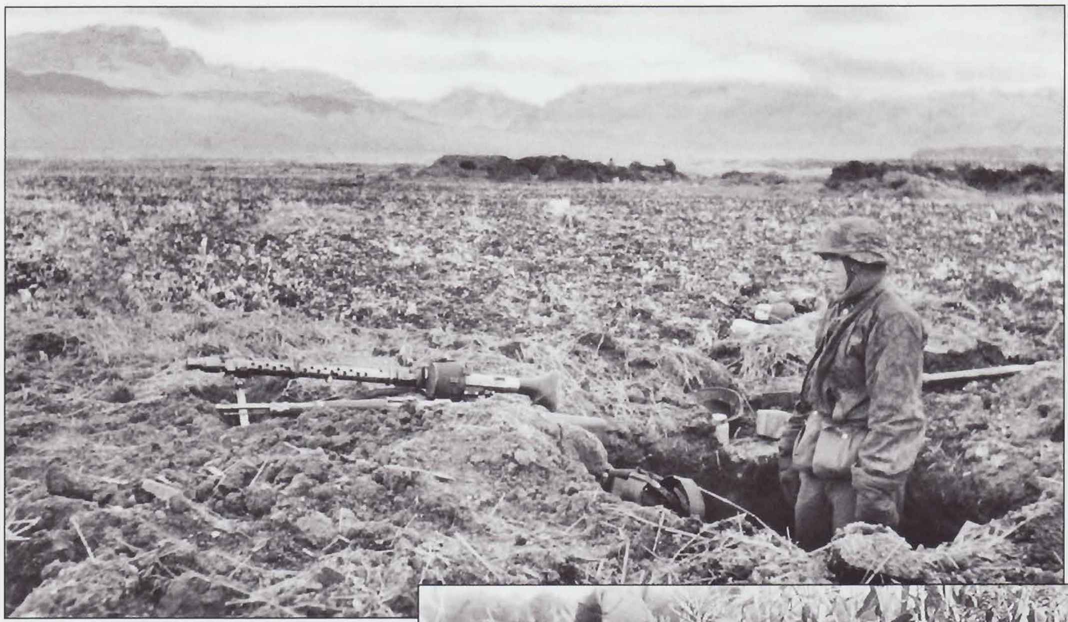
SS riflemen and an MG section supporting a light 2cm FlaK38 anti-aircraft gun are in action against an enemy target in hilly terrain somewhere on the Eastern Front. The whole troop is wearing the same reversible winter uniform autumn side out. The pattern appears to very similar to that of the "plane tree" pattern of the 1940-42 period. All the soldiers wear the M42 field cap and have no field equipment.



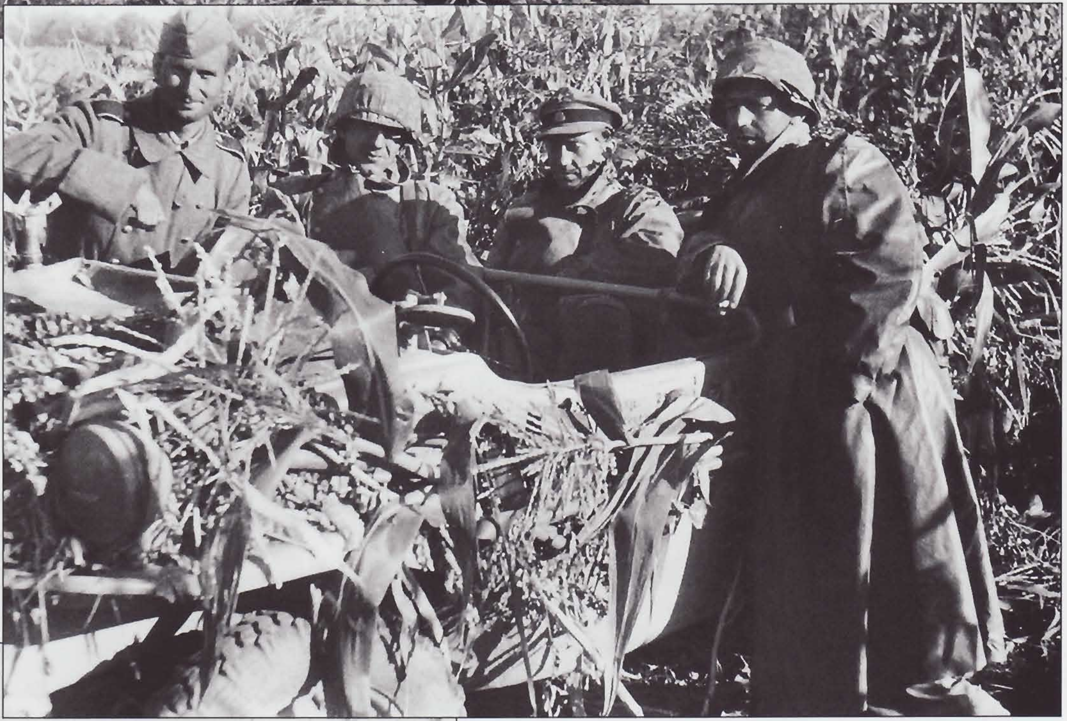
The strongest fire support in the Waffen-SS arsenal was the 21cm Mörser, seen here in early 1944. This photograph is a fine view of the gun and its projectiles. Note the size of the rammer needed to ram home the 150kg shell. These projectiles could be hurled some 20km into enemy lines with devastating



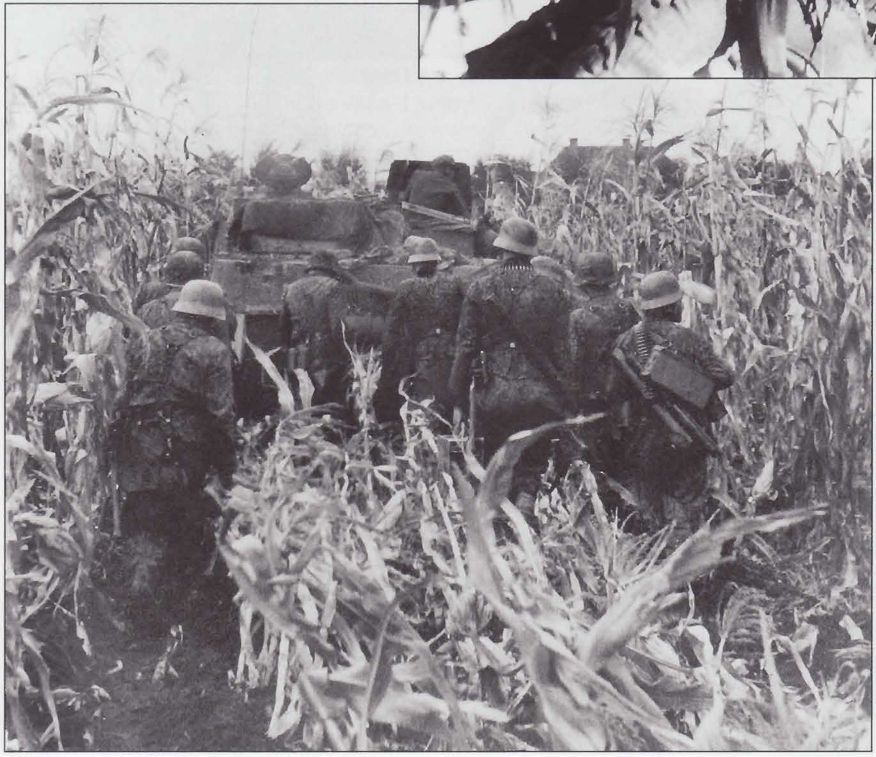
Another photograph of the same 21cm Mörser, this time from a frontal angle with its gun barrel in an elevated position. Traces of white winter camouflage paint are still visible over parts of the weapon.



An MG34 position somewhere on the Ukrainian-Rumanian border area. For the rest of the winter in 1944, the Kampfgruppen saw more action as Soviet forces continued to push the Germans westward out of the Ukraine. By January 1944, the unit had lost more than 1000 of its 5000 troops.



"Das Reich" officers pose for the camera standing next to a Schwimmwagen in a maize field during the early spring of 1944 in Rumania. In March the unit had fought its way through enemy forces out of a pocket before reaching the relative safety of 4.Panzerarmee at Buszacz.



SS infantry in full camouflage uniforms follow a StuG.IV approaching enemy positions somewhere in Rumania.

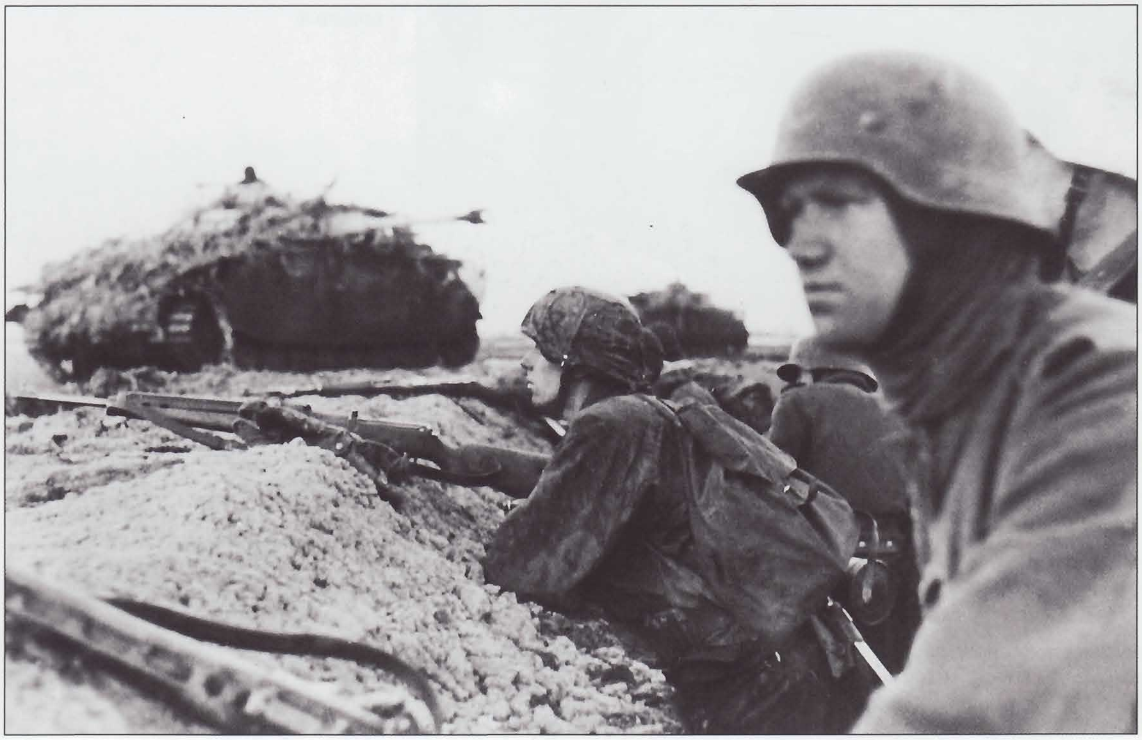
A group of SS soldiers pushes a light truck along a sandy road during the early spring of 1944. The truck is towing a light 7.5cm l.IG18 infantry gun. Even by this period of the war, the Waffen-SS were using this infantry gun for close support, and it was aggressively positioned on the battlefield in both defensive and offensive roles.

A familiar photograph taken during the latter half of the war, showing German troops cowering from intense Soviet artillery fire. The constant hammering of enemy ground and aerial fire was demoralizing for the men that had to endure it.

A column of "Das Reich" armored vehicles photographed during late 1944. A platoon of very rare StuG.IV assault vehicles led by a Pz.Kpfw.IV command tank with additional radio equipment has halted on a road.

SS soldiers armed with Kar98k bolt-action rifles enter a sunflower field. The troops' camouflage smocks blend well with the local terrain and help reduce the already growing casualty list.

One of the quickest and most effective means of transportation was by rail. Here vehicles of "Das Reich" have been loaded on specially designed flatbed railway cars destined for the front. Note that the soldiers have applied foliage between the vehicles in a drastic attempt to afford some kind of concealment from aerial observation.



SS troops of the "Das Reich" Division in late 1944. Two Pz.Kpfw.IV tanks can be seen supporting the defenses. Note the soldier in the center armed with a captured Soviet 7.62mm SVT-40 automatic rifle, named SIGew259(r) by the Germans.

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